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LIGHT OF THE WORLD



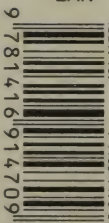
BASED ON THE HIT TV SERIES
CREATED BY CONSTANCE M. BURGE

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"I want something from you and your masters, and I can offer something you desire in return," James confided.

The creature roared impatiently. "I've heard such offers in the past. Know that if your terms do not please me, I will strike you down and tear your soul asunder for an eternity."

James sighed. "And I've faced threats from things like you for almost a hundred long years. Yet I'm still here, in one piece—though the flesh, I'll admit, is borrowed."

He's not James at all, he's the lighthouse keeper, Phoebe realized. Or—the Keeper's spirit's inside him!

The creature laughed, then intoned dryly, "Make your offer."

Phoebe listened carefully as the keeper offered the creature and its masters the world—literally. It seemed that they had tried to gain a foothold in this dimension many times before and had always been cheated or beaten back. What they planned for this world was nothing less than a paradise for their kind, a world of darkness and evil, that would spell the end of all things for humanity.

Oh, okay, Phoebe thought. Heard that one before, plenty of times. Here I thought this might be something to really worry about!

"Soon I will have the means to turn my dark dreams into a reality that will drown this world with misery," said the keeper. "The Light of the World is about to be mine."

Charmed®

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Light of the World

Published by Simon & Schuster



LIGHT OF
THE WORLD

1890

1890



LIGHT OF THE WORLD

An original novel by Scott Ciencin

Based on the hit TV series created by

Constance M. Burge



SIMON SPOTLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

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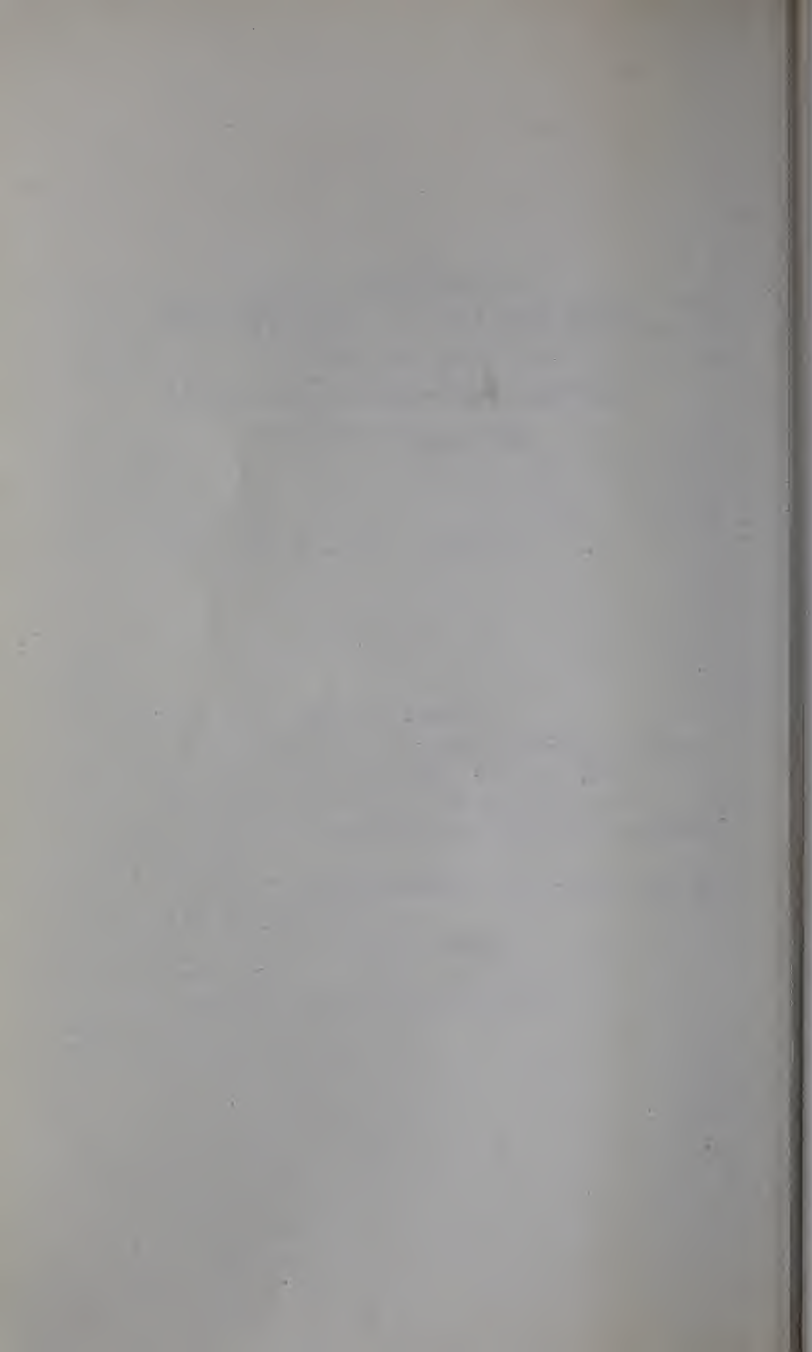
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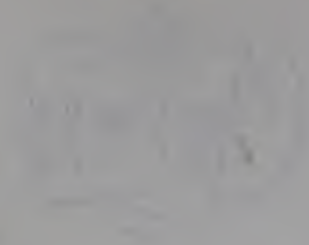
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Dedicated to Alexa,
long may you be a shining light
in this world;
and with love and appreciation,
always, to Denise





LIGHT OF
THE WORLD



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Chapter 1

Silver moonlight sparkled across the rain-slicked gabled roof and lofty windows of Halliwell Manor. Inside, the front door burst open and three beautiful but exhausted sisters swept into the gently lit foyer. All three cast aside rain slickers as the insistent ringing of the phone greeted them. The eldest sister reached over and seized the receiver.

"Make it good," Piper Halliwell demanded. "You have no idea what kind of night it's been!"

"Piper?" asked a familiar voice on the other end.

Piper frowned, her brow furrowing. The voice on the other end was one she hadn't heard in a long time, and it took her a moment to place it. A warm rush of excitement came over her as she realized who was calling. "Lyssa?"

Laughter echoed from the phone. "The one and only!"

Phoebe and Paige crowded around Piper,

Phoebe grinning wildly as she mouthed, "Speakerphone, speakerphone, speakerphone!"

Sighing, Piper asked Lyssa to hold on a moment, then put the call on the intercom so Phoebe could listen in. Paige hung back, crossing her arms over her chest, clueless about why this call was a big deal. She made an "I don't get it" gesture.

"Lyssa used to live around here," Piper explained softly. "We grew up together. I told her all about you the last time we talked."

Paige nodded and smiled.

"So, Lyssa, what's up?" asked Phoebe.

"I'm getting married!" Lyssa revealed, the news eliciting a chorus of happy screams from the Charmed Ones.

"That's fabulous!" Phoebe commented.

"Wonderful," added Piper.

"I'm Paige," the third sister put in. "That's fantastic!"

"There's more," Lyssa said. "In fact, I kind of have a favor to ask. Phoebe, would you be my maid of honor? And Piper, Paige, I'd love for you to be bridesmaids."

Another loud round of happy screams rang out.

"So when's the big day?" asked Piper. "I'll mark it on my calendar."

"Um . . .," Lyssa said softly. "It shouldn't be too hard to remember. It's this Saturday!"

Piper's eyes widened in disbelief. "That's not a lot of notice."

"I know. I sent out invitations to all three of you months ago and didn't hear anything," Lyssa sheepishly admitted. "The truth is, I really should have followed up a lot sooner than this, but things were crazy and I just sort of forgot."

"Oh, honey, we never got them!" Phoebe explained.

Lyssa breathed a sigh of relief from the receiver. "So—it's in a little village upstate called Serenity Cove. It'll be the wedding of the century! Can you make it?"

The sisters exchanged worried looks. A single unspoken thought seemed to pass between them: With all the demonic activity lately, how could the Charmed Ones possibly risk being away from San Francisco for so long?

Piper felt a lead weight descend upon her heart as she said, "Sweetie, we'd love to, but . . . there's a lot going on right now. I don't see how we could do it."

Soon the call had ended and the sisters were in the kitchen, running towels through wet hair, fixing hot cocoa, and cleaning up the mess from their whirlwind session of potion-making that had taken place there two hours earlier. Pans filled with smelly slush and open jars overflowing with rare but pungent herbs consumed the countertops. A whole *lot* of demons had been popping up lately, and the Charmed Ones had been very busy vanquishing them.

Phoebe was scrubbing her hands. "I've had so much rosemary, mandrake, and bloodwort ground into my palms lately that I think I might smell of the stuff for the next week no matter how many times I wash up!"

"I hear ya. It's been . . . what? A *week* of this?" asked Paige as she began screwing lids onto spice jars. "How many demons do you think we've vanquished since, I dunno, Tuesday?"

Piper shrugged as she gathered up used pans. "Lost count."

"Yeah," Phoebe joined in. "Was there a convention or something?"

All three sisters found themselves in a funk over not being able to attend the wedding, but what was there to say? If only they could find a way to go

A shimmering sparkle appeared to Piper's left, accompanied by the high, beautiful sound of wind chimes on a summer afternoon. Leo appeared, Wyatt cradled in his strong arms.

"Ladies," he said with a broad grin. "How did everything go tonight?"

"Charmed Ones, three; demons, zero," Piper said as she stepped away from the cleaning effort.

Leo leaned in and kissed his wife, then offered Wyatt up to his loving mommy's attention. She let her son grasp her finger and wiggle it for all it was worth. He giggled.

"How's this one been behaving?" asked Piper

as she made kissy faces at Wyatt. "No dimension-hopping or making imaginary beasts real, I trust?"

"Nothing of the kind," Leo said. He looked over to Phoebe and Paige. "Something's wrong."

"A friend of ours just called and asked us to be a part of her wedding," Phoebe said, drying her hands. "This weekend."

"That's great!" Leo said.

"Not great," said Paige. "Can't go."

Leo's forehead creased. "Why not?"

"Because we're the Charmed Ones, and evil's been crawling out of the woodwork lately," explained Paige.

"Right," said Piper. "Who knows what might attack next? Or when?"

"Hmmm," Leo said, considering this. "But the demons tonight, you vanquished them, right?"

"Oh, yeah," said Phoebe. "They're toast."

Leo scooped Wyatt up to play airplane with him. They zoomed around the kitchen. "So I don't see the problem. There aren't any problems you know about right now, and if any come up, I could just orb over there and let you know. Or I could send an e-mail."

Piper did a double take. "Wait a second. You're *our* Leo, right? Not some evil twin from another dimension?"

He laughed. "Why do you ask?"

Paige nudged her way past Phoebe and said,

"Because the Leo we know always gets wiggy at the sight of our PC. He's not a Web-surfing nut like most guys."

"I had to have something to do while Wyatt was sleeping and you three were out saving the world," he said wryly. "Saving it *again*, I should say, and very well, I might add. As a Whitelighter, I have to say that I'm very proud of the terrific job you ladies have been—"

"Yeah, yeah, quit trying to butter us up and change the subject," Piper said. "You've actually been using the computer?"

"Yup," Leo said brightly. "By the way, I've set us up with online banking and transferred the car insurance and a couple of other monthlies to automatic payment to save us some time."

Piper squinted at Leo. "I'm still not sure if I should say thank you or grab the kid and force you to tell me what you did with the real Leo."

He laughed again and bounced the happily squealing Wyatt in his arms. "You're always telling me I need to update my act and become more used to living in the twenty-first century, and you know me, I aim to please! Besides, do you really think Wyatt would let me anywhere near him if I wasn't really his dad?"

Piper relaxed. Leo had made a great point. "Sorry, all this demon-fighting has messed with my nerves."

"The important thing is that you can go, if that's what you want to do," Leo assured her.

"Leo's got a point," Paige said urgently. "We really could use a break, and Lyssa could use her friends. *And* if he stays here with Wyatt to keep an eye on things, there's no reason for us to stick around!"

"I'll second that," added Phoebe.

"Well, evil *does* take a break, sometimes," Piper admitted. "Rarely, but it happens."

Leo's grin widened. "Think of this time as a chance to recharge your magical batteries, so to speak. You know . . . have some fun!"

"Is that *allowed*?" Paige asked, hope simmering in her wide gaze.

"Let's do it!" Piper cried.

The sisters raced back to the phone while Leo bounced Wyatt in his arms.

Three days later, the sun rose high and set the clouds afire with blinding yellow light as a bloodred haze swept the sky and reached down to brush across the hood of Piper's new minivan as she drove along the coastal highway with her sisters in the back. Piper hadn't set out the day before with the intent of coming home with a new car, but Leo had found an amazing deal online. When they dropped by the dealership to check it out, the saleswoman offered to let Piper borrow the minivan for her trip this weekend, then either purchase it or return it, no pressure either way, when she got home on Monday. Considering their regular vehicle desperately

needed to be taken to the shop and might not make the long journey, Piper agreed, cautioning the saleswoman that she probably wouldn't end up buying the car.

"I'm willing to take that chance," she replied.

So here they were, bound for the northern California coastal village of Serenity Cove, where they would join the wedding party of their childhood friend Lyssa Ainsley.

Piper felt a sudden cramp in her thigh and nodded toward a rest stop up ahead. "Need to pull over, girls!"

Phoebe and Paige murmured something grumpy but unintelligible from the backseat. They had fallen asleep with Phoebe's head on Paige's shoulder and were only waking now to the glare of the rising sun in their eyes.

The rest stop turned out to be more of an observation station and picture-taking platform, a hundred-yard-long section of railed-off asphalt with a handful of parking spaces that overlooked the ocean and the lovely landscape leading down to the water.

Piper got out of the car and stretched her legs. And her arms. *And* the muscles in her neck and back.

Man, she was stiff.

"Tell me again why I agreed to driving this whole way?" grouched Piper.

"Road trips," Phoebe said between wide yawns. "Gotta love 'em."

Beside her, Paige was opening a can of soda and belting down a couple of hearty swallows. The redhead would begin twitching from the caffeine before they even got back to the car. Piper just knew it.

"Love 'em?" asked Piper, a spasm of irritation crossing her lovely face. "No, really, I don't. Remember the Devil's Slide a few hours back? Lots of fun there. A narrow ribbon of twisty-turny road carved into the side of the mountain with about as much space across as a rubber band. DANGER ROCKSLIDE signs everywhere. Then, wow, imagine this, wait for it, now—rocks start sliding."

"You blew 'em up good and loved every minute of it," Paige said in a sudden yet happy sharp staccato, the caffeine already bursting like fireworks in her brain.

"No, I did not!" Piper hesitated as she walked over to the railing with her sisters. "Of course I blew them up *well*, that's what I do. But that's not what I'm talking about. We could have just orbled."

"Then we would have missed out on all that sisterly bonding stuff," Phoebe offered. "And we wouldn't have had a car when we arrived. *And* how would we have explained getting there so quick?"

Piper frowned. "Commuter flights."

The three witches leaned against the railing and looked out at the picturesque coastline. A boat

with some kind of big, clunky, chugging mechanical apparatus was anchored just off shore.

"I'm psyched," revealed Phoebe. "Lyssa Ainsley. Little Lyssa, getting married. It doesn't seem like all that long ago that we were all over at her place, painting our nails, throwing pillows around during our sleepovers, talking about boys. . . ."

"Wow," Paige said wistfully. "Missed out on that whole scene."

Piper nodded. Paige's childhood was anything but the relatively blissful time Piper had shared with Phoebe and her oldest sister, Prue. Paige had been a ward of the state for a time, shuffled from foster home to foster home. And even when she finally found herself in the care of a good family—the Matthews—they were taken from her in a tragic auto accident. In her earliest days as a witch, Paige had traveled back in time in an attempt to save the Matthews, but time and destiny would not be undone. All Paige had been able to accomplish was to share a few very important moments with her adoptive parents, finally telling them how much she loved and appreciated them.

No . . . Paige's childhood memories probably *didn't* have much to do with romping around in fuzzy slippers with her pals on sleepovers.

"We know you did, sweetie . . .," Piper said, rubbing her back reassuringly. "Wish we could do something about it."

Paige put her arms around her sisters. "You already are. And for the record, Phoebe, I'm not going to get tired of hearing stories about Lyssa and how you guys grew up. Piper's the resident grump on that score, not me."

"Watch it," Piper warned in a playful tone.

Below, the water near the anchored boat began to bubble. A large, dark, and shiny bulbous head bobbed up from the depths and quickly revealed that it was attached to a man in an old-fashioned diving suit.

So that's what the machinery on the boat's for, Piper realized, to let that diver guy breathe down there.

The diver made his way to the boat and climbed up onto the deck. The parcel he carried in his gloved mitts looked like an artist's easel complete with a canvas bearing a painting. He also had a long, rectangular wooden box, like the kind a painter might use to carry his brushes, palette, and tubes of paint.

Weird.

Piper couldn't restrain herself. She just *had* to ask. "Hey, buddy! Whatcha doin' down there?"

The diver took off his helmet, revealing a middle-aged man with a thin sheen of stubby, reddish hair atop his large head. He laughed and called, "I'm a painter. I just finished my latest!"

"Yeah, but . . . why were you underwater with it?"

"That's what I do!" he replied. "I paint

seascapes from under the water. The water distorts color, but it's a lot of fun. Plus, my agent sells these things for a fortune because they each come with their own crazy story about the things I did or saw under the water while painting it. That's the world we live in, right? Everybody's got a gimmick."

"Sure," agreed Phoebe.

"Besides," the painter called in a deadpan voice, "I'd be doing it whether I sold my paintings or not. I love it down there . . . and I'm kind of hoping that eventually I might turn half-fish and won't need my diving gear anymore!"

"Okayyyy . . .," Piper muttered softly, somehow managing not to gawk in disbelief. "Nutjob dead ahead. I suggest we move away slowly from the railing and—"

"Hey, we're heading to a place called Serenity Cove!" Phoebe hollered. "Know anything about it?"

The man's spine stiffened. "I wouldn't go there if I were you. The people there are *really* weird!"

Soon they were back in the minivan. Phoebe and Paige had the giggles like a couple of little girls and they didn't stop cracking up and making jokes until the sign for Serenity Cove appeared off to their right.

"Booga wooga wooga!" Paige cried.

"Ees spooky, ees scary," Phoebe added. "We shouldn't go to Serenity Cove. Who knows what

eeeeveeel lurks and hides in theese place. . . ."

Piper sighed. "Ya know, if I wanted to spend time with children, I could have just stayed at home and taken Wyatt to the park to visit all his pals. At least they don't give me any lip. . . ."

"Sheeee's angryyy," Phoebe said, unwilling to give up the wacky voice she'd invented to pass the time.

"Aw, jeez, Ma, you never let us have any fun!" Paige hollered, laughing again as she booted the back of Piper's seat a couple of times for good measure. Phoebe joined in with the kicking until they collapsed in another round of tearful, hysterical laughter.

Next time, we fly, Piper decided. "And keep your feet off the seats!" she barked. "I don't own this car"—she looked at all the minivan's bells and whistles, felt its smooth handling, considered its affordable price—"yet."

They entered the village and cruised along the main stretch of Serenity Cove, passing fun-looking little shops, restaurants, and office parks, many of which sported snazzy neo-Mediterranean styling, while the rest looked as if they'd been perfectly preserved for a century. In the distance, they saw a lighthouse, a solitary and noble tower rising to protect seagoing vessels, though these days it seemed to be more of a historical landmark than anything else.

Piper parked, and a few passersby nodded pleasantly in their direction. The locals didn't

look especially out of the ordinary, despite the crazy painter's warning. Piper checked her watch. "We're early. Lyssa's not supposed to meet us for another twenty minutes."

"Why didn't she just have us meet her at that big mansion her folks rented?" asked Paige.

"My guess is she wanted to see us for the first time away from all the wedding craziness," Piper replied.

"Or maybe eet's because the mansion ees *haunted*," Phoebe put in with a nutty roll of her eyes.

"Okay, ixnay on the wacky voicenay," Piper commanded. "I'm serious."

"Whatever," Phoebe said happily. Nothing would get her down today, not if she could help it.

They walked to the café where Lyssa had said she would meet them, but according to the sign in the window, the café wouldn't be open for another fifteen minutes. So much for waiting for Lyssa there. The sisters decided to take a stroll down the street to take in the sights and stretch their sore muscles.

"So, Phobes, are you psyched that Lyssa asked you to be her maid of honor?" Paige asked.

Phoebe stretched her arms high over her head and strutted on in her designer boots and form-fitting jeans. Her tight, fuzzy pink sweater was already gathering attention from guys driving by on their way to work.

"Sure!" she said brightly. "But it's not like there's a whole lot for me to do. Her family took care of most of the wedding arrangements. They hired planners, caterers, the whole nine yards. The bachelorette party, though . . . that's all mine. And, I promise you, it's gonna be *hot*."

Piper sighed. "Somehow, I'm not sure I want to know what you have in mind."

"Just as well," Phoebe said wickedly. "Don't want to spoil the surprise."

Suddenly, a beautiful but haughty-looking raven-haired young woman burst from the wide, double doors of a theater directly ahead of the sisters, a handsome, middle-aged man in a tweed suit scrambling after her.

"You really think Bethilda May Lynn needs help from a loathsome lothario like you?" cried the woman, her eyes blinking with overdone disbelief. "I'm destined for Broadway, then Hollywood. I'm going to be a star, a really big star!"

"Bethy, Bethy, honey, sweetheart, I really was just offering to run lines with you," her companion wheezed, his well-lined face growing chalky. "Listen, I'm a happily married man. I own a paint store, for heaven's sake. You really think I'd risk giving all that up for a fling with a girl half my age?"

She stopped, her face frozen in rage.

He backed away as she turned to face him, his shoulders raised in sudden alarm. "Bethy, I mean . . ."

"Are you saying," she asked, each word punctuated by a huff, "that *I'm* not good enough for *you*?"

"Bethy, no, sweetheart, no! It's just—"

"Then you *were* hitting on me."

"What? No, I never said that."

"Then what are you saying? That my beauty and radiance and raw talent aren't enough to make *any* man want me?"

"Huh? Uh, no!"

"Ha! Case closed. You're a cad, and we're finished. Find yourself another ingenue. I'm packing my bags tonight!"

With that, she stormed off, and the paint salesman slunk away down the street.

"Huh," Piper said, thinking back on the underwater painter's words of warning about the denizens of Serenity Cove. "Well, that wasn't that weird. Local theater types—you get them everywhere you go."

On the other hand, the purple pigeons approaching them really *were* that weird. Piper cast her gaze to other pigeons that were perched on canopies and window ledges, some sporting bright red or green feathers, others shocking pink.

"That's just flaky," Paige announced.

"Yeah," Piper added in a worried voice. "Or magical . . ."

And there it was. Piper had been fighting a mounting dread that this vacation would prove to be yet another in which they became

embroiled in the supernatural, and the painter's warning hadn't helped.

But a businessman going down the street set them straight as he stopped to feed the pigeons and explained to the perplexed Piper that an eccentric millionaire who lived on the outskirts of town made dyeing pigeons odd colors his hobby.

"I'm cool with it," Phoebe said. "Eccentrics, odd personalities—it goes with the territory for a quaint little seaside village, right? Like that guy in the boat said, it probably helps them sell the place to visitors."

"Painted pigeons," Piper pronounced. "I dunno. It just makes me wonder why Lyssa picked this place at all. She could have gotten married anywhere. . . ."

A pounding patter of footsteps rang out behind them from the cobblestone street. Piper whirled as a scruffy boy ran up to her and seized her sleeve.

"Please, lady, please!" he cried. "Would you help me?"

"Um . . . whatcha need?" asked Piper, raising one eyebrow in a questioning slant.

"It's Old Mavis," the boy said breathlessly. "Whenever she catches one of us anywhere near her place, she runs out and whacks us with her broom. And my dad gave me this note for Mr. Fielding and his place is right next to hers! I'll be picking broom straw out of my hair for the next month if I go there!"

Piper fixed her sisters with a "didn't I tell you?" look. "Yep, everybody in this village is a little odd."

"You're right," Phoebe replied. "The kid's calling *you* a lady. He must have a screw loose."

Piper snagged the note, and the boy whooped and hollered and skipped away, leaping high twice for good measure.

The Charmed Ones had to stop into a couple of shops to figure out which one belonged to this Fielding fellow, but soon they had deposited the note in the grateful old barber's hands. The sisters left his old-fashioned barbershop—and were suddenly confronted by a grave-faced, stocky woman carrying a heavy and weathered broom.

"Children," Old Mavis yelled. "I smells them on you!"

"Okay, *this* is just creepy," Phoebe said, turning away quickly. "And she runs a bakery. Oven big enough to pop little kids into?"

"Shut it," Piper warned. "Old Mavis?"

The woman nodded.

"Right, well," Piper said pleasantly, "y'see, this little boy told us he couldn't come within spitting distance of your place or else you'd be out chasing him with your broom. Kids, huh? They say the funniest things. . . ."

"Yes, that's true," Old Mavis said seriously.

Piper frowned. "Um . . . the part about kids saying the funniest things, or the part about you chasing them with your broom?"

The broom shot up into the woman's hands.
"Both, I would think."

Paige surged forward. "You know, there are other things you could do with your broom."

The woman stared at Paige as if she had two heads. "But . . . I'm Old Mavis."

"How nice for you."

"And this is my broom."

"Right, but . . ." Paige shook her head. "Why do you use your broom for that?"

"What else would I use it for?" Old Mavis said, whirling and sweeping back into her bakery, the rich scent of cinnamon wafting out as the door swung open. "You city folk have strange ideas!"

The witches wandered back to the café, and Piper's expression was grave. People were inside getting the place ready, but it still wasn't open.

"So Lyssa's folks are loaded, huh?" asked Paige, hoping to get Piper's mind off her worries that the sisters had dropped squarely into the Twilight Zone . . . again. "We're talking beaucoup bucks, right?"

"Not so much when we were growing up," said Phoebe, "but they inherited a boatload of cash not long ago from some relatives they never knew they had."

Paige laughed. "A lot of that going around."

Shrugging good-naturedly, Phoebe reflected that Paige was not referring to suddenly finding herself wealthy but instead to her somewhat

recent discovery that while she had been raised by foster parents, she actually had sisters, a real family by blood.

"Well, this place *is* something," Piper grumbled as they walked along the sidewalk, peering into shops.

"I love it," said Phoebe.

"I said it was *something*," Piper expounded. "I didn't say *what* that something was. Sure, it looks nice, but so do a lot of tourist traps . . . or towns sitting over Hellmouths or whatever. . . ."

Paige shook her head. "You're just not willing to let yourself relax and enjoy this time away, are you?"

"Don't mind her," Phoebe advised. "She's always like this on the first day away from home. All crabby, wondering if she made a mistake and should have stayed home, thinking about the club and Leo and Wyatt . . . then something will happen and she'll just slide right into the whole relaxing vacation thing. You watch, you just wait and see."

"Um—standing right *here*," Piper commented. "And, for the record, not grumpy. Cautious. Sensible. One of us needs to be, and—oh, look at that!"

Piper swiftly stole across the distance separating her from a quaint little bookshop. From the signs and the merchandise lining the windows, it clearly specialized in books, games, and toys for children. A hanging mobile of the stars and

the planets caught her eye. It was never too early to think educational while picking out toys for Wyatt. . . .

The sisters swept into the stuffed-to-the-brim toy shop, their senses immediately overwhelmed by fuzzy bears bigger than most ten-year-olds, and rows and rows of what looked like every children's book ever published. Piper stopped before a tiny little black ape wearing a crimson bowtie and holding a little red heart-shaped pillow that said Hug Me.

"Isn't that too cute!" Piper said, melting as much as *she* ever melted. "I'm going to find a ton of things for Wyatt. I'm so glad we came!"

Phoebe shot Paige a look that said, "Toldya so!"

While their sister browsed, Phoebe and Piper burrowed deep into the store's three long rooms, finding more stuffed animals, tons of toys and games, and books, books, books!

Paige was thoroughly wired on caffeine now, and was incapable of standing still for more than an instant or two at a stretch. Phoebe finally stopped trying to keep up with her and instead went on her own hunt for a gift for Wyatt.

In the far back room, a woman was speaking in the warm, excited, theatrical voice of a born storyteller. Phoebe peeked around a corner and saw a woman in her fifties decked out in an old Victorian gown, reading from a large, open book to a dozen enrapt children, a few only a year or two older than Wyatt.

And though she hadn't meant to, Phoebe soon found herself listening to the woman's tale. . . .

"The lighthouse keeper wasn't always an evil man," read the author, whose display proclaimed her as Jenna Marsten, author of *The Serenity Cove Lighthouse Mystery*. "Quite the opposite! When it came to his fiancée, the lovely Trudy, he had nothing but love in his heart. And although Trudy only had eyes for the keeper, there was another man who had *his* eyes on *her*."

A round of "uh-ohs!" rose up from the kids—and their moms and dads.

"This rival was an educated man," continued the storyteller. "A handsome lawyer who many believed helped smugglers and other criminals conduct their business in plain sight while staying out of reach of the long arm of the law. The keeper was aware of his rival's interest in Trudy, but the seasoned guardian of the light wasn't particularly concerned. He assumed it would only be a matter of time before the lawyer found another, more available, young lady upon whom he would shower his attentions.

"Then came that night . . . that wretched, wretched night, when the lives of so many would be changed forever. The keeper's beloved Trudy had departed on a sailing ship a month earlier to see her family and bring them back here for the wedding. The keeper stood on the lookout, watching as night fell and his beloved's ship appeared as a tiny dot on the still waters of

the horizon. He manned the light with care and excitement as the moon rose, his thoughts stealing to the bliss he would soon know when he held his sweetheart in his arms once again.

"Suddenly, the sky split as a savage storm tore across the heavens! Thunder shook the walls of the lighthouse, and rain pelted the glass like daggers hurled from the sky. Fear gripped the keeper as he thought of his precious Trudy on that fragile ship. She was so near to him now . . . near to him, yes, and at the same time so close to the treacherous breakers that could smash her ship into firewood and leave few onboard alive!

"Yet the light was working, and he thought of her reassuring smile, her laugh, her touch, and somehow he made himself believe that all would be well.

"The great searing spotlight struck forward into the night, then flickered—and *failed*.

"The keeper screamed in rage and terror in the darkness. He lit his small, handheld oil lamp and searched all around the light's mechanism like a madman for the cause of the trouble. He had to make the great light work again, he had to shine that incredible beacon out into the night before it was too late!

"Outside, the wind howled and the storm shrieked. Soon he heard the cries of people hollering in fear, and the horrible sounds of Trudy's ship breaking apart against the terrible rocks

that each and every one of you children has played upon.

"Think on that. You laugh and chase one another upon those stones, you dance and sing and paint pictures upon them with chalk, or carve and scrape your initials into the stones . . . those same stones that have known blood and terror, that have taken the lives of your ancestors!"

The children gasped as one.

Phoebe smiled. *She's good, I'll give her that. But I couldn't see Piper letting her darling boy listen to scary stuff like this until he's a lot older . . . like maybe after he graduates from college. And I don't think I'd blame her!*

"The screams of the battered boat and the broken bodies of all onboard would haunt the keeper for months to come, because among the survivors, his Trudy was not to be found," the storyteller went on. "Her body was dragged beneath the sea and pinned low by a chunk of debris, where it was found days after the disaster.

"There was an inquest, of course, but the keeper had no interest in the findings of his peers as to the cause of the light's malfunction. He had just blamed his rival, swearing that the lawyer had made a deal with his criminal friends to tamper with the light. Did the keeper think his rival had *known* the storm would arrive the very night the light would fail and that Trudy would be doomed? No, he didn't believe

so, but the inspector for the lighthouse *was* due that evening, and the failing of the light would have meant humiliation and possibly the end of a career for the keeper. A lighthouse keeper's sworn duty, above all things, is to *keep the light burning!* The lawyer wanted to destroy the keeper's reputation, or so the grief-stricken man claimed, and to make Trudy see him, the lawyer, as a far worthier candidate for marriage. This was what the keeper told everyone who would listen to him.

"Later, of course, the lawyer said these charges were ridiculous and unfounded, and he would have pressed charges for malicious slander if not for the poor keeper's grief. The lawyer chose instead to hold his head high and bear these terrible insults in the hope that the keeper would one day come to his senses. That day never came. Instead, one night, the lawyer met with a horrible and, most agree, inexplicable fate.

"The lawyer was alone in his home, locked up in his study preparing for an important case, when his servants suddenly heard *explosions* coming from the den. They raced to the door and saw it bowing outward, the wood looking like it might break, as if some impossible pressure was being placed on it from within. There were no windows in that room, no other way in or out. The lawyer's screams were all but drowned out by the bangs and

clatters and the awful, awful ripping wet sounds! Oh, *my!*"

The storyteller took a moment, comically fanning herself for dramatic effect—which eased the tension and coaxed giggles and titters from her audience.

"The noise finally stopped, and the door to the den simply swung open. What the servants found is best not described in a tale such as this. Suffice to say the lawyer had been *crushed* and *shredded* and *drowned!*"

Delighted shrieks exploded from the listeners.

"The room was soaking wet," the storyteller explained, "the furnishing destroyed. It was as if the most violent storm in history had been unleashed—but only within that room! You might wonder if the keeper was suspected in the unusual demise of the lawyer. He was, naturally, but who could possibly lay these strange events at the keeper's door? Even if he was the one person above all with great motive, he was seen elsewhere at the time, and did not have the means to commit the crime.

"It was a month after his beloved's death, on the eve of the hearing in which the official findings regarding the light's mysterious failure were to be read, that the keeper suddenly disappeared. He maintained his watch until moments before the first ray of dawn, then stepped out to examine something in his garden, and was never seen or heard from again.

So said his assistants. He left a note behind, vowing that just as he was robbed of his happiness, he would one day find a way to deny hope and happiness to *everyone* in the world—even if he had to come back from the dead to do it."

"Sheesh," Paige whispered as she glided beside Phoebe. "This keeper guy . . . bitter, much?"

The storyteller opened up the floor to questions. After a few of the toddlers had their turns, Phoebe stepped into the open and raised her hand. "When did all this happen, supposedly?"

"There's nothing supposed about it," said the author. "Except all the speculation about magic and vengeance from beyond the grave and so on, but all the rest is well-documented. Going on a hundred years ago, that's when the keeper's beloved perished and the keeper himself vanished."

Phoebe thanked her, then moved on with Paige to find their older sister.

"Uh-oh," Paige said with a wink. "Big anniversary coming up—that can't be good."

Phoebe rewarded Paige with a long, questioning look. "What anniversary?"

"The lighthouse keeper going to his grave, swearing vengeance—all that stuff . . . almost a hundred years ago. A hundred-year anniversary . . . sounds like trouble to me!"

Phoebe knew that it was the caffeine talking,

not Paige. Her half sister was just having some fun . . . or so Phoebe hoped.

They found Piper paying for the mobile she'd spotted in the window—and the cute little ape. The eldest Halliwell made them spill about the story they'd heard *and* Paige's concerns.

"Come on," Piper said as she slipped her bank card into her billfold. "I'll admit I'm nowhere near as cranky as I was feeling when we first got here, but every town has its local legends. And did you see all the lighthouse toys, and the paintings of the lighthouse and the keeper that they sell here? People keep these stories alive so they can sell merchandise and entertain visitors."

As they turned to leave, Paige added in a low voice, "What if there *is* something to it?"

"Then we'll deal with it," Piper assured her. "As always."

She gasped as the door suddenly flung inward, right at her, and a lovely, petite, blond-haired woman darted right for her, the woman's mouth wide in a comically exaggerated cry of surprise.

"Piper!" cried the woman, whose smile radiated incredible power—and great joy.

"Lyssa!" Piper responded, dropping her packages and taking her friend in a big hug.

While Piper and Lyssa hugged, Phoebe surveyed her old pal. Lyssa was a slip of a girl with a wild and fiery golden mane, a heart-shaped

face, and a button nose. But her eyes were dark and brimming with mystery, her lips full and pouty. No man ever stood a chance with her. Oddly, she had no idea that she had such a strong effect on men—and that was part of her charm. She wore ripped blue jeans, and a sparkly blue top that revealed her rock-solid abs gained through years of devotion to dance.

Phoebe received the next crushing hug, then Lyssa paused and nervously brushed the pretty bangs from her face as she stood before Paige—the sister she didn't know.

Paige jokingly raised her chin and looked down regally at Lyssa, as if considering whether she was good enough to embrace.

"I give really good hugs," Lyssa claimed with a playfully soft, little-girl pout.

"She really does," assured Phoebe.

With a laugh, Paige flung her arms open wide and hugged the young bride-to-be. "Come here, ya knucklehead!"

The lovefest continued all the way to the café on the corner, which was now open. They went inside and snagged the best booth near the window. The view beyond the main drag, to the cove, the lighthouse, and the ocean that lay beyond, was breathtaking.

But as beautiful as the view was, it couldn't compare to the radiance of a friend in love. Lyssa's smile was dazzling as she listened to the sisters' comic adventures that morning. "Oh, so

you've been listening to the local gossip about the lighthouse, the old wives' tales, and the ghost stories."

"You've heard them?" asked Phoebe.

"I've hardly heard anything else." She pursed her lips and scrunched her forehead, deep in thought for a moment. "Oh, that's right, I've barely had a chance to tell you anything about James."

"James?" Paige asked.

Phoebe nudged her with a gentle elbow to the arm. "The groom-to-be."

"Right, *that* James!" —

"It's all right," Lyssa said. "I think it'd be pretty sad if I were getting upset over something so silly as your not remembering his name."

"Thanks," Paige said, relieved. "But what does *he* have to do with the ghost?"

Before Lyssa could reply, a waitress came over and took their orders. As she left, Piper leaned in and said, "Well? Tell us about James!"

"And the ghost!" added Paige.

"They're just stories. . . ." added Piper with a roll of her eyes.

Lyssa beamed as she thought about her beloved. "Well, he's a professor at Oxford. . . ."

"Older guy alert?" asked Phoebe with mock concern as she leaned in and gave her friend a long, slow, appraising look.

Lyssa giggled. "No, not so much. He's just done so much with his life in such a short period of time, that's all."

"I want to know when we get to *meet* this mystery man of yours," Paige interjected. "And I'm still waiting for something about the ghost!"

"Oh, well, as far as meeting him, right now he's at the lighthouse, digging around. He thinks there's a book in the real-life mystery behind the legends, so that's why I've heard so many stories. Anyway, I know he's dying to meet all three of you, but he just starts exploring and the time gets away from him. He's *never* on time for anything. We'll have to set all the clocks ahead to make sure he gets to the wedding on time. Um . . ."—she dug through her purse and withdrew a billfold—"I've got pictures!"

The sisters crowded around as they took in the handsome guy in the engagement photos with Lyssa.

"Whoa, can you say hottie at three o'clock?" asked Paige.

Phoebe fanned herself. "Three o'clock, four o'clock . . . you name the time, I'm in."

Lyssa laughed. "You guys are so bad!"

James was a ridiculously good-looking man. At a glance, he had been cut in the overall Cole Turner model, with piercing eyes, dark hair, and chiseled features. But in most of the shots he revealed more of a Jake Gyllenhaal twinkle in his eyes, and a Brad Pitt kind of self-deprecating air. His hair was full and bushy, his face longer and leaner than Phoebe's demonic ex. He was tall and the proud owner of a finely muscled

swimmer's body that was revealed in a vacation photo taken on a friend's boat, in which he and Lyssa wore bathing suits.

"Okay, getting drool on the photos," Piper said, yanking the shots away from her single sisters and returning them to Lyssa.

"So what's the plan for today?" asked Phoebe.

Lyssa winked. "Well . . . after we have our fun here, I thought we'd head over to the mansion, you guys could drop your stuff off and change if you want to, and then . . . well, it's a surprise!"



Chapter 2

"This place is pretty amazing, isn't it?" asked Lyssa from the top of the broad, winding, stone staircase.

Phoebe nodded in agreement. She still couldn't get over the thirty-room Mediterranean-style mansion that Lyssa's parents had rented for the month leading up to the wedding. For one thing, Phoebe wouldn't have expected to find a place as huge and opulent as this in such a sleepy little village—it had its own courtyard, for pity's sake—and for another, the cost of acquiring the place must have been staggering.

Phoebe had been given a private room large enough to house the contents of a good-size moving truck (and maybe the truck itself), furnished in marine-themed antiques and overlooking the sparkling ocean. The sisters shared an incredible walk-in closet that adjoined all three of their rooms and was stuffed with stunning vintage clothing, shoes, bags, and jewelry.

Lyssa urged them to help themselves to any of the clothes or accessories they liked—and to badger the kitchen staff to their heart's content.

"Really, you can't upset these folks," Lyssa assured the sisters. "Whatever it is you've got a craving for, food-wise, they'll find a way to make it appear on your plate. They love a challenge!"

It all sounded, well . . . magical. But without actual magic.

Phoebe hoped.

"I was thinking that we're in for a really crazy couple of days," Lyssa said as she skipped down the stairs toward her pal. "I don't know how many chances I'm going to get to just spend time with you three, so how about we hike on down to the village and have ourselves a shopping spree—and we can take care of the fittings for our gowns, too. I can't wait to hear what you think of our designer!"

"You've got your own designer?" Phoebe asked.

Lyssa rolled her eyes. "I know, I know. To be honest, James and I would have been just as happy throwing on some nice clothes and heading over to the justice of the peace for the wedding. But the 'rents have had their hearts set on my wedding being this whole fairy tale extravaganza for as far back as I can remember, even when we were dirt poor. So I don't want to let 'em down."

"How do James's folks feel about all this?"

Lyssa shook her head. "They died when he was young. He grew up on his own—just took off before Child Services could figure out what to do with him. Lied about his age when he was fourteen and got hired on a merchant ship sailing for the Indies and never looked back. He's been all over the world, he's published papers on antiquities and lost cultures—he graduated at the head of his class from Oxford! You wouldn't believe the stories he can tell, but, um . . . sorry, I kind of lose my head when I start talking about him."

"So . . . ," began Phoebe, "why this place? Why Serenity Cove?"

"Oh! Well, that comes down to his traveling too. James was on a merchant ship in the Mediterranean when he heard about the legend of the Serenity Cove lighthouse. The next time he was in the States, he came here to check it out and decided, like I was saying before, that there might be a book in it for him. University press, not *Harry Potter*. And once he started describing the place to me, I just couldn't get it out of my head. I started dreaming about it. Finally, we decided to have the wedding here."

"So he doesn't have any other relatives? No friends?"

"No relatives. Tons of friends, but they're scattered all over three continents. His best man, Tom, won't even be arriving until about two hours before the ceremony, and he'll be gone again that night!"

They strode together into the marble courtyard and sat down in sprawling lawn chairs next to the pool while they waited for Paige and Piper to come downstairs and join them.

"I can't thank you enough for agreeing to be a part of my wedding," said Lyssa. "I know it was short notice and out of the blue, especially asking you to be my maid of honor like this when Becca was called away. You've really come through for me."

"I'm just excited to be here," Phoebe said, warmly taking her friend's hand. "Piper and Paige, too."

Lyssa sat up and fixed her with a quizzical look. "The funny thing is, I sent invitations out *months* ago. I should have followed up by phone sooner, but things have been so crazy, and well . . . I'm just so glad I called when I did!"

Piper and Paige appeared in the archway leading back to the study just in time to hear Lyssa's last statement. Phoebe and her sisters exchanged glances, but all three waited until Lyssa had excused herself to take a call before commenting on this revelation.

"Hmmm," Phoebe murmured. "The Elders really bent over backward to make sure we'd know it was safe to come out to the wedding."

"Yeah, and y'know?" said Paige. "I thought that was because they had some reason for wanting us out of town, or they wanted us here to do something . . . But now I can't help but wonder

if they did it because they've been running interference, keeping us from finding out about Lyssa's wedding in the first place so we wouldn't be distracted from all our battles, and then they got to feeling *guilty* about it, and . . ."

The Charmed Ones looked at one another. The Elders? Feeling guilty about something?

"*Nah!*" they cried in unison. The invitations probably just got lost in the mail!

The trip into town was uneventful, though they couldn't get over Lyssa's roadster, a vintage silver Aston Martin DB5, just like the car in the early James Bond movies.

"All the rest of my money goes to charities and funding the dance school I started in Greenwich Village two years ago," Lyssa explained. She tapped on the spotlessly polished dashboard as the car hummed down the winding highway. "This is my one indulgence. I've wanted one of these since I was ten."

Phoebe couldn't deny that it really was a sweet ride.

"Can you believe I still have gifts to pick out?" Lyssa asked, the roaring wind rustling her hair.

Phoebe's brow furrowed in confusion. "But you're the *bride*, sweetie. All the gifts are for you and James."

Lyssa shrugged and smiled sweetly. "It's my day and I love the idea of giving gifts to all the wonderful people in my life who've done so much for me!"

Phoebe laughed. Lyssa really was the best!

Aside from a few eccentric locals and the weirdly painted pigeons, the friends had the lovely downtown shopping area to themselves. After hitting every shoe store in sight (there actually *was* more than one), the quartet bought cinnamon pretzels from a corner kiosk and stopped next to a beautiful flowing fountain to stuff their faces.

Phoebe saw Lyssa gazing anxiously at the sky. Between bites of her pretzel, her pal whispered, "Seventy-five during the day, only a light breeze, nothing but perfect sunny weather on the horizon!"

Lyssa's litany was not a magical mantra. The bride-to-be was quoting from local weather reports, hoping the clear, blue skies would hold until after her wedding.

Phoebe glanced up at the fountain's cascading waters as they splashed off the faces and backs of laughing sculpted sea nymphs. It really was a beautiful, peaceful little village.

"So, 'James,'" Paige said in a playfully stuffy, professorial voice. "He never goes by Jim? Maybe Jimmie? Or Jimbo? This guy's never a 'Yo, Jimmy-Jam, what up' kinda fellow?"

Lyssa grinned and shook her head. "You'll see when you meet him. He's a really laid-back guy, not stuffy, if that's what you're getting at. . . ."

"Well, *college professor*. . .," Paige coaxed.

"He's not like that at all," Lyssa said. "Not

one of those uptight academic types. That said, yeah, always 'James.' It just suits him, like a knight from another time, sort of. . . ."

"I'm intrigued," Phoebe said, her cinnamon pretzel nearly gone. "And a little jealous."

"Don't be," Paige muttered. "The whole knight-in-shining-armor bit? Been there, done that. Not what it's cracked up to be."

Phoebe raised an eyebrow. Paige was referring to a handsome knight who had tried to woo her during her encounter with the evil sorceress Paige had been in a past life. But the knight had only wanted her because he was under an enchantment. What a buzz-kill!

Stretching her neck, Phoebe heard the soft crashing of the water behind her intensify. She looked to the stone nymphs again and saw one of the statues suddenly break in two, releasing an explosive torrent of water that rushed right at Lyssa!

"Piper!" Phoebe hollered as she grabbed Lyssa's arm and hauled her friend up from the circular stone lip of the fountain.

The roaring splash didn't come. Out of the corner of her eye, Phoebe saw that the fountain's waters had been frozen solid by Piper's power. Lyssa was clear now, so Piper released the flood, the sudden spattering wave pounding the very spot that Lyssa had occupied a few seconds earlier.

Lyssa's head whipped to one side as she saw

the tail end of the falling waters. She yelped and nearly slipped on the watery slick that had swept from the fountain to right under her feet on the cobblestones! Phoebe still had a grip on her pal, and kept her from falling.

"It's the ghost," Lyssa said with a smile and a dismissive gesture the moment all four of them were a dozen yards from the malfunctioning fountain.

"Pardon?" cried Phoebe. "What ghost?"

A trio of young guys carrying surfboards strode by. One was kind of pudgy and dour looking, but the other two were tall, lean hunks. The closest looked over and delivered a friendly tilt of his chin. "Way misterioso, dude, I totally know what she's talking about. You know, the lighthouse keeper's ghost, the one from the stories," the surfer said. "That's what everybody around here says when anything goes wrong. Remember how it was a few years back when people used to say, 'Blame it on El Niño' for whatever wasn't going right in their life? After that wicked storm? Around here, it's that ghost guy who gets all the blame. It's a little like tossing salt over your shoulder, y'know?"

"That keeper guy, he's probably the one making everyone miserable and he keeps it up because everyone dumps on him so much, saying that all the time," added the chunky, freckled surfer with the lousy attitude. "I would if I were him!"

"You're the hottie getting hitched this weekend, right?" said the last of the surfers, the other good-looking one, as he nudged his board in Lyssa's general direction. "Well, hey, good luck with that!"

Lyssa thanked the trio as they ambled off, yet Phoebe couldn't shake the strangest feeling that maybe their last comment hadn't been quite as heartfelt and sincere as it might have been. In a way, it sounded more like, *good luck—you're going to need it!*

The near soaking at the fountain was soon forgotten as the group sailed through an art gallery, a jewelry store, and a shop selling expensive bath products. They casually sauntered into a lingerie store, laughing about finding just the perfect thing for Lyssa's wedding night, and soon ran out again, giggling like teenagers.

Then Phoebe slipped back into the shop. She caught up with the others a few minutes later, two stores down.

At last they came to Nouveau Ricia, a dress shop that also housed a beauty salon and a mini-café.

"Wait until you meet Flavia!" Lyssa cried, beaming with excitement.

"Um—I take it she's either a Roman empress or the woman who designed your dresses," ventured Phoebe.

"Little of both," Lyssa admitted. "But she is *fun!*"

An assistant with bright pink hair ran to the back to let Flavia know that Lyssa was there with her maid of honor and two of her bridesmaids for their fittings. While the women waited, they strolled down an aisle filled with antique crystal perfume bottles.

"I'd like to get one of these for my aunt," Lyssa said, her gaze wavering between the Italian green glass and the Egyptian pink glass with gold trim. "Phoebe, which would you pick?"

Phoebe shrugged. "I don't know. I guess it depends on your aunt. What does she like?"

Suddenly, Phoebe heard a tiny *hiss*, and a blisteringly pungent scent—like eau de skunk—shot up her nose and set her throat and lungs on fire. She gasped and wheezed, smacking at her chest and swallowing hard as she struggled to catch her breath. Finally, she did, and then, whirling in the direction from which the strong scent had come, she expected to find a "helpful" salesperson standing before her with a perfume dispenser in hand.

No one was there.

"Phoebe, are you all right?" Lyssa asked, alarmed.

"Yeah," Phoebe assured her, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. *What was that stuff—the delicate aroma of sulfur dioxide?* "Just got something in my nose."

"Maybe it's allergies."

"Maybe," Phoebe agreed hopefully.

Then two more quick hisses came—and Piper and Paige backed off, choking. Phoebe spun to see—or *think* she was seeing—a perfume dispenser angle itself back among the rows of its fellows. She grabbed the dispenser, sniffed it cautiously, and nodded inwardly. Sure enough, this was the bad boy that had launched an attack on them. Or was used in the attack. But who had done it?

Phoebe looked to the aisle on the other side of the bottles, to see if some prankster might be lurking there, waiting for a chance to make more mischief.

No one was there.

And when Phoebe looked back to her stricken sisters, she saw that Lyssa was gone too! *It's like someone was trying to distract us—but why?*

A high, shrill shriek came in answer from the salon. Phoebe ran ahead of her sisters and found Lyssa being whacked and pelted by a water hose near one of the hair-washing sinks. The hose had ripped from the sink and was whipping around like a hissing serpent, spraying sizzling hot torrents at Lyssa, who was backed into a corner, screaming and darting back and forth to escape the spray. The hose seemed to have a will of its own, and it zeroed in on her for several long, searing seconds before the closest stylist grabbed hold of it and thrust it away long enough for Lyssa to escape.

"It's the ghost!" chorused three of the hairdressers and a gaggle of elderly customers.

As Piper and Paige grabbed towels and helped dry off the trembling Lyssa, Phoebe wondered if there might not be something to this ghost business after all.

"What in the name of Flavia Tyler is going on here?" roared a throaty female voice from a hidden aisle behind the sisters.

"In the name of *Flavia Tyler*?" Phoebe repeated in confusion.

"Flavia doesn't believe in a higher power greater than herself," a hairdresser whispered.

It wasn't hard to see why, when Flavia Tyler appeared suddenly, revealing herself as a tiny but powerful stalking presence within the cramped dress shop, a whirling dervish of intensity and ill temper. She barked out orders to her lackeys, accompanying her commands with a swift kick to the rear or the savage grasping of an ear. She was a dark-haired troglodyte in mauve, barely human in her prim business suit and sharp heels. Small and pinched, her shoulders hunched, her features knitted up in a constant scowl, she came off like an absolute shrew.

Flavia *demand*ed to know what had happened to Lyssa and swore that whoever was responsible would not only be fired, they would be boiled, baked, and broiled!

While Flavia ranted, her pink-haired assistant saw to Lyssa. She tenderly examined Lyssa's

glowing skin to make sure she hadn't been scalded and spoke gently and reassuringly as she led her back to a private office. Phoebe heard the pink-haired girl promise to clothe Lyssa in a "fresh little something" she had hanging around that just happened to be in her size.

The excitement died down quickly—except perhaps in the eyes of the Charmed Ones, who were now wondering if a supernatural agent just might be involved after all.

"Wow," said Piper. "*This* doesn't look much like the work of an angry ghost who doesn't want anyone to live happily ever after, now does it?"

"Nawwww. . .," agreed Paige, her tone dripping with sarcasm. To her, it looked *just* like the ghost was not only for real, but had Lyssa on his radar!

"So what do you guys want to do?" asked Phoebe. "We don't have any proof that the ghost is involved here, or that the ghost is even real. We really shouldn't jump to conclusions. It's like they say in psychology: When you're trained to be a hammer, you tend to see everything as a nail."

"And sometimes a cigar is just a cigar," Paige said. "Your point?"

"I think we've all been half expecting some kind of magical weirdness to start up ever since we arrived here. And we're witches. *The* witches. The Charmed Ones. So we tend to see

the supernatural in just about everything. I'm just saying we need to check things out on the magical front, but we should try to be objective. What we've seen today *could* just be coincidence, really bad timing, bad luck . . . you name it."

Her sisters reluctantly agreed. They split up and went snooping around the salon and café.

Phoebe did her best to find solid proof that a magical entity was at work in the shop, but nothing presented itself to her scrutiny. Soon, she found herself glancing at the sky-rocketing prices of the clothes here and the incredible fashions. She was stunned to find a dress shop this *swanky* here in the village. She wondered how, in this out-of-the-way location, the shop owner pulled in enough business to keep the place profitable. "Wow—must be a lot of weddings around these parts, huh?" she muttered.

The *click-clack* of heels made her stop. Phoebe looked up from an expensive dress and gasped as she saw Flavia stopped right in front of her, sternly crossing her arms while narrowing her gaze. The woman's face was hard and unreadable.

"I don't mean to pry or anything," Phoebe began awkwardly, worried that she had offended the designer with her comment. "I'm just curious. . . ."

A smile suddenly broke over the designer's rocky face

"Oh, I'm just full of mysteries," Flavia admitted. "Like the name of this place. Nouveau Ricia.

New Ricia. Who's Ricia? A play on the phrase 'nouveau riche,' sure, but could there be more to it? Maybe I just like to keep people guessing!"

"I see," Phoebe said, still a bit concerned about getting run over by the dervish of a woman whirling before her.

"You want to know how this place pays for itself? That's easy. I used to have an exclusive boutique in Hollywood," Flavia revealed. "I had movie stars and heiresses fighting over who would have the exclusive rights to my original designs, I went to all the right parties, I lived in a fancy house. . . . But after a while, I realized I wasn't having any fun. I had lost sight of everything that was important to me. There was no joy in the work anymore. I was just going through the motions. That's when I knew I had to make a change. So I came back home, and now I pick and choose my clients very carefully."

"But-but—" Phoebe stammered. Finally, she took her life in her hands and said, "You seem so nice! Yet . . ."

"You're talking about my little tantrums, hmmm?" Flavia grinned. She leaned in close to Phoebe and whispered conspiratorially, "My apprentices—and most of my clients—can't get *enough* of my behaving badly. They think it's a sure sign of genius. And it's fun to be outrageous and just let fly with whatever comes into your head now and again—so freeing, don't you think?"

Phoebe nodded, thinking back to a time or two when the effects of some wayward spell had made her give in completely to her impulses.

"The thing is," Flavia added, "your friend Lyssa's one of a kind, as beautiful on the inside as she is on the outside. We all need to look out for her now that her most special day of all is in front of us."

"Absolutely!" Phoebe agreed quickly.

"So if you do get an idea that what happened here was someone's fault, and not just an accident, please be good enough to tell me. I want to make sure nothing else happens to her."

As the dressmaker walked away, Phoebe thought, *It's true what they say about people . . . you just can't judge from appearances!*

For some reason, that thought triggered images of James, his warm smile, his dark and fetching good looks . . . could *he* really be all he seemed?

Flavia glanced back over her shoulder and added, "Besides, if we do find out who's responsible, a good time will be had by all, I promise. It's been way too long since there's been a public execution in Serenity Cove!"

Phoebe headed back to the café, where she spotted Paige and Piper sitting with a still soaked—but stylish—Lyssa, who was wearing a new outfit. Lyssa's fingers flicked over the straps of her tight, black, button-down camisole while her bare toes kicked up into sight from

her jeweled sandals, which were neatly shaded by her crisp white slacks.

More importantly, Piper and Paige had Lyssa laughing, and it was a wonderful sight.

Phoebe waved to her sisters, who quickly rushed over even as Flavia and her pink-haired assistant sidled in to take their place at the table with Lyssa, each proffering samples of cloth for Lyssa to survey.

"The dresses are *done* and those two keep coming up with ideas," Piper said quietly as they met near the tiled lane that split evenly toward either the salon, dress shop, or café.

"Geniuses love to tinker," Paige said. "Read that somewhere. I think it was in an 'Ask Phoebe' column!"

Phoebe laughed and leaned closer, her smile instantly fading. "Let's talk magic. We may have to pop back here with some crystals and see if they pick up a weird charge. I didn't see any runes scratched into the walls or bizarre symbols buried in the art hangings, nothing that looked or smelled like potion residue."

"Same here," confided Paige. "Nothing nada zip."

Piper nodded. "Ditto. Of course, the trouble wasn't just here, was it? The whole water craziness, I mean. It started with that fountain down the block."

"And it's all centered on Lyssa," Phoebe said. "Kinda makes me wonder what's next—"

With a shrill cry, the sprinkler overhead flared to life.

"You just had to say it!" wailed Piper as water shot down at them!

Phoebe looked up—and saw that it was *more* than just water spraying from the nozzles.

"Yahhhh!" hollered Phoebe as thick foaming frothy bursts of dark diet soda splashed her face and head, covering her like molasses and ruining her hair.

Then the liquid flinging from the high sprinklers changed from freezing soda to hot scalding tea. Phoebe dove for cover as the hissing, steaming liquid fell, dragging Piper along with her as Paige orbbed herself out of danger. Sizzling streaks of liquid struck about them like guided missiles.

In seconds the sprinklers went back to sending clear water, but the moment the Charmed Ones saw it was safe to spring to their feet, more madness erupted in the café. A cooler filled with ice burst open and a battering barrage of ice cubes sailed through the air, smacking the running and screaming clientele.

Phoebe's gaze widened as she saw clouds of ice cubes rise up and whirl around as if they had been caught in a mini-tornado. Squinting, she saw a steamy form juggling the cubes, a translucent, human-shaped body made of water that changed shape suddenly, the arms and legs

stretching or retracting like liquid rubber bands. Other similar forms dove and sprang about the café, dress shop, and salon, every one of them able to burst from or flow into containers of any size or shape—when they weren't splishing and splashing around free.

"So much for hammers and nails or whatever that whole thing was about," said Paige quickly. "I spy with my naked eye some very magical-looking water guys!"

"Yup," said Phoebe, not about to argue the point. "Either of you have a spell handy for dealing with 'em?"

"A few," Paige admitted. "But we're supposed to be on vacation. No potions, no ingredients, nothing!"

Phoebe glanced around at the salon counters filled with perfume bottles and potpourri, and the well-stocked racks of exotic spices near the café. "Y'know? I don't think that's going to be a problem. . . ."

After a few minutes of scrambling on their hands and knees to avoid the newest plagues unleashed by the weird watery creatures, the Charmed Ones met up, quickly put together their supplies, then rose to face their attackers.

Paige chanted:

*Imprisoned be
Mister Water-eee!*

With those words she hurled a perfume bottle she had emptied out a moment earlier and refilled with a magical potion. The bottle shattered at the feet of the nearest water creature, which wailed in surprise as a huge net of blazing electrical energy stole up around it, trapping it near the café's counter. Another of the creatures leaped to its side, attempting wildly to free it.

"Mr. Water-eee?" asked Piper with a smirk.

Paige shrugged. Phoebe said nothing. Sure, the rhyme had been lame, but they had no time to come up with anything better *and* those words had gotten the job done. Besides, hers wasn't much better.

She called:

*Those who just
Fell like rain
Begone, begone
Down the drain!*

The water creatures shrieked again—and were suddenly plucked from spots all over the design and beauty compound as if by great invisible, magical hands. Their shrieking, kicking, and morphing shapes were hauled into the sinks in the beauty salon and café and drawn down into hungry drains.

"Nice!" said Paige, shaking out her dripping wet hair.

"Yeah, but they'll be ready for those spells

next time," Phoebe told her. "We'll have to think up new ones. . . ."

"You think there'll be a next time?" asked Piper. "Maybe we scared them off for good!"

Phoebe looked at her friend, who was being helped to her feet by Flavia and her assistant. "Considering how happy she is? If this is the lighthouse ghost looking to make other people as miserable as he is, then our little Lyssa's got to be like winning the jackpot for him. Yeah, I'm pretty sure he's only getting warmed up."

Piper was frowning.

"Okay, what?" asked Phoebe.

"Jeez, you two," Piper said. "Nice spells there. I'm going to have to sign both of you up for some poetry appreciation courses!"

"So . . . what did yours say?" asked Phoebe. "The spell you wrote but didn't have to use because mine and Paige's worked so well?"

"Never mind," said Piper in a huff. "I doubt you could appreciate true artistry at work."

"It was even sadder than ours," said Phoebe.

Paige nodded. "Totally!"

They went over to Flavia, her assistant, and Lyssa—the only people who were still in the store. The other customers and workers had cleared out during the wild and wet weirdness.

Lyssa's eyes were wide. She looked around, stunned. "I'm . . . I, uh . . . what just happened?"

"A water main must have shattered," Flavia said quickly, her feigned fury doing little to

cover up her very real fear. "And you can be sure I'm going to sue the builders, the plumbers, and the electricians over this!"

"Looks like everything's back to normal now," Piper said.

Phoebe nodded—until she heard a loud *splash* and a chorus of liquidlike laughter echoing from somewhere close.

"Wait—what's that sound?" asked Flavia worriedly. "It's coming from my workroom, where I have all your dresses laid out!"

They rushed to the workroom—and stopped short of going inside, instead crowding around together in the doorway while pools of weird, congealing color slowly crept their way around the room. The floors, walls, and ceiling looked as if spray cans of every possible color had exploded there at once. Streaks of mauve mingled with globs of green and gold. Mannequins dipped in glistening dark chocolate brown and bright cotton candy pink mutely waved in their indignity. And upon the table lay the most disheartening sight of all.

Lyssa's shoulders slumped as she took it all in.

Phoebe caressed her friend's arms, realizing that it had all been a trick. While a handful of the pain-in-the-neck water thingees had made a mess out in the main area of the dress shop, salon, and café—and kept the Charmed Ones busy in the process—some of their demonic pals had come to the workroom to perform their

watery ninja raid against the designer's vats of dyes.

"So those are our dresses, huh?" asked Lyssa.

"They are, yes," Flavia said flatly.

Piper frowned as she stared at the glow-in-the-dark lime green wedding dresses—and their bright purple polka dots. "And here I was worried that the bridesmaids' gowns were going to be hideous."

"Well," Flavia said, running her hands through her soaking wet hair, "these dresses are unique—and they *really* make a statement!"

"Yeah," Piper added. "And that statement is . . . yuck!"

They left the dress shop, and even though Lyssa was shaken, she did a great job hiding it.

"You know what?" she said resolutely. "I wasn't sure I believed in fate until I met James and understood right away what people mean by love at first sight. I've been a believer since then. So if destiny—or whatever—is saying I'm going to be married in lime and purple, then that's how it's going to be. The *important* thing is that I'm going to be married, and that will last a lifetime."

"Wow," Phoebe said firmly. "Girl, you don't mess around!"

Lyssa arched an eyebrow at her. "When it comes to the things I care about the most? No, I don't."

Phoebe gave her friend a big hug.

Lyssa pulled away and winked. "Listen, I should get back. Even with the wedding planner and all the rest of those guys that Mom and Pop hired to make sure the big day goes off without a hitch, there are so many things I need to keep up with. Otherwise we'll end up with oyster Jell-O being served at the reception and 'The Macarena' for the first dance!"

"She's not kidding," Piper said reflectively. "That kind of thing could happen. Or worse. A lot worse. One time, when I was catering, there was—"

Phoebe elbowed her and cut her off. "And there was this amazing and perfect wedding where nothing else went wrong except some funkiness with the dresses."

"Oh," Piper said, finally noticing how Lyssa's shoulders had gone square and tense at the mention of other wedding disasters. "No, she's right. That's just what I was going to say."

Lyssa kissed each of them, then hurried down the cobblestone street toward her car and home. The sisters would get a taxi when they were ready to go back.

Hmmm, wondered Phoebe. If it is the grumpy lighthouse ghost using these water creatures to keep the happy couple apart, then there's somebody we really need to look in on!

"Guys," Phoebe said warily. "James is alone at the lighthouse, isn't he? Where the ghost saw his sweetheart get killed? Maybe—"

"Say no more," cut in Paige. She touched her sisters' shoulders, ready to orb the three of them to the lighthouse in the distance—and stopped when she saw a trio of locals watching them.

"I'll guess we'll have to hoof it," Piper said as she broke into a run. "And hope we get there before anything else can happen!"



Chapter 3

James Agatt, Lyssa's fiancé, wrapped his frayed and weathered scarf tightly about his neck as he climbed the lighthouse's wide stone inner steps. The scarf's fabric was rough and scratchy against his neck, but he didn't mind. He was wearing a little piece of history, the very scarf that had been wound around the neck of this very lighthouse's most legendary keeper the night he vanished. Many claimed it was all that had ever been found of the man, and James wore it every time he spent the day in this amazing place. It helped him get into the spirit of his research.

The lighthouse was a traditional ivory tower rising from a pedestal of raw stone and topped by a pointed light room. There were no bands of crimson or other color spiraling around its exterior to help sailors see the lighthouse by day, because the builders had thought that an unnecessary expense. A half dozen well-placed windows

peered out from the lighthouse's smoothed surface, and a balcony with a railing wound about its upper length.

Within, the light fell in soft golden slants, illuminating the lowest space, cleared now and ready for wedding decorations, but once used entirely for provisions and supplies. Climbing the staircase's seventy-seven steps brought James to the first wooden ceiling and a heavy wooden trapdoor. Pushing on it, he stepped up into the living quarters, which were broken up into separate rooms by large, ornate wooden dividers. In the sleeping room lay two old cots, a chest, and an armoire with a wide set of double-doors leading out to the balcony. The den held a desk for reading and composing, and many bookshelves. An old stove and a table for meals denoted the dining room, while two chamber pots and an iron-toed bathtub carved out the bathing area. Another set of steps led up to the final floor, which housed the light.

James climbed these now, and soon came to the great light and all its workings. This was his favorite spot of all, where one could spend hours gazing out through the wide, glass panes to the rocky shore and the rolling sea beyond.

He tried to imagine what life was like here as a keeper.

The keeper's duties were endless. Some were simple, like cleaning the walls and floors of the lantern and sweeping the stairs, while others

required more skill and finesse, like polishing the lens, cleaning and filling the lamp, trimming the wicks, and maintaining all the machinery in perfect order. The foghorn had never been automated, and that meant that when a thick fog rolled in, the keeper or his assistant had to stand by it, sounding the siren for hours on end, even days, until the fog cleared.

He removed a small voice recorder from his pocket and hit record.

"As I wind down my explorations of Serenity Cove's lighthouse, I find myself, for the first time in my life, anxious to be done with the past and all its secrets," James dictated. "The reason for this is clear, I would think. I'm getting married to the most amazing woman who ever lived, and my thoughts are firmly focused on the future.

"To date, I've pored over all the town records and accounts from the time of the keeper's disappearance and have spoken with the descendants of those who lived through the mysterious events. I've examined every inch of the lighthouse itself, plus the keeper's house, and all the sites in the village that have any relevance to my investigations. This includes the former home of Frederick James, the lawyer my subject blamed for the death of his fiancée.

"I would have to say that while I've had the time of my life doing this research, my findings are inconclusive. That many of the locals truly believe in the existence and power of the lost

lighthouse keeper is undeniable. But this is a village of eccentrics, and I haven't come here to create a study of superstitions and how and why people keep them alive. I'm here seeking answers to a mystery: I've come to learn how Mr. James actually died and if the keeper had any involvement in his demise. And I have to say . . . I got nothin'!"

James laughed and hit the stop button on his voice recorder. *Just as well*, he thought. *I've spent too much time away from Lyssa as it is. The last thing I need is to come across—*

He turned and his boot slipped on something that lay on the floor near the complicated apparatus housing the lamp. Steadying himself by grabbing hold of one of the many sturdy iron clamps holding the lamp in place, he looked down and saw a pocket watch staring up at him, face out, its hands frozen.

How'd I miss this? he wondered. *I've been over this place a hundred times! Where could this have come from?*

Trembling with excitement, James plucked up his slim voice recorder—and nearly dropped it. Setting it carefully on a shelf near the lamp, he began recording. "I've just found something. It appears to be a very old pocket watch, exactly the style that would have been current around a century ago. I'm picking it up now to give it a more thorough examination. . . ."

James dictated a barrage of minute details

about the watch, most importantly that it bore the initials of the keeper who lost his ladylove here a hundred years earlier. He wound the watch until its springs were nearly as tight as they could go, and waited. A low, steady ticking rose from the watch as the second hand swept steadily around its face.

"I can't prove it," James said, angling his face toward the voice recorder, "but I'm convinced this belonged to the lighthouse keeper. I know it in my bones."

Flinching at the realization that such superstitious nonsense had come out of his lips and been committed to tape, he grabbed up the voice recorder and wound it back to that last passage. Yet instead of erasing it, he played it back and listened to his words.

Only . . . his weren't the *only* words on the recording—his wasn't the only voice!

"*The light,*" said a dire and distant whisper echoing behind James's words, "*the light must never die. . . .*"

What was that other voice?

James froze. What was he thinking? There was no other voice, there couldn't be—that was crazy. He would have heard if someone had snuck into the lighthouse and was hiding nearby, throwing his or her voice and having some fun with him. No, it must just be some weird echo.

He played the recording again and heard no voice but his own.

Terrific, he thought. Now my imagination is playing tricks with me.

James peered down at the watch once more, its steel surface tingling and alive with cold fire. "Where did this come from, anyway?"

Kneeling, James examined the machinery at the base of the light, near where the watch had been sitting. The watch couldn't have been hidden in that mass of gears all this time, could it? No, that was ridiculous!

A tiny flash of light from across the room caught his attention. He whirled so quickly that he banged his head on the underside of the light and saw stars blaze before his eyes. As his vision cleared, he discerned the source of the tiny flash: A panel near the base of the wall had sprung open. James had never realized there even was a panel here; the surface had always seemed smooth, but now he saw that this was a secret hideaway, a tiny space with a spring-loaded door set to open at some secret command. The watch had fallen from this space, and there were *more* surprises inside, including an old journal belonging to the lost lighthouse keeper!

James's concerns that he'd been losing his wits were instantly forgotten as, with breathless excitement, he opened the journal to a page at random and began reading. . . .

"Once every three months the inspector comes to examine the house and the light," wrote the keeper, "to ensure that all is being perfectly

maintained and kept spotlessly clean. We who attend the light are given no notice, no warning whatsoever, of when he may arrive.

"The inspector for our station is a black-hearted wretch who lives for the grief and panic he causes. He wields great power over us. After all, two failing inspections and you are relieved of duty! And the inspector's criteria are exacting. He will search for a line of dust on a windowsill or a spot of soot near the stove . . . then exact *terror* for the hours he spends berating you over such infractions. Fail to climb the high, outer walls of the lighthouse to keep the windows free and clear and he will have you without fail.

"But I fixed him. The answer lay in my garden . . .

"My garden is the envy of all who travel in these parts. The soil is unusual. Magical, some say. Impossible though it should be, it can give life year round to all manner of rare and exotic flora, from the mysterious deep-violet black dragon coleus to the lovely purple rose of St. Mary's milk thistle, or the blooming splendor of the orange-crimson African tulips. The flowers I grow are sought after by the hardened men of the sea who feel so deeply, but don't know the first thing about using words to express their affections for the women they leave behind. Ah, but a bouquet from my garden always speaks volumes.

"So, in return for a sumptuous bouquet now and again, the ships run special flags to let me

know ahead of time that an inspector is coming and I am always able to get my house in order with time to spare.

"The flowers that grow in my garden are said to have amazing medicinal powers, and they cast quite the spell over those who encounter them. My own beloved Trudy chides me for even entertaining such superstitious beliefs about them, but I have heard and seen strange things in my days in this lighthouse, and I have seen my flowers *work*.

"But, Trudy, when asked if she might believe that magic could be real . . . fiddlesticks, she says. Fiddlesticks! Though she adds that if the flowers *did* have magical properties, it would be my responsibility to only use them for the good of others and not personal gain. She cites cautionary tales of those who cheat and cut corners in this all too brief time we have on earth and the backlash that inevitably comes of such short-sightedness and greed.

"By God, how I love this woman. What an imagination she has!

"Deep down, though, I harbor beliefs that there is indeed a force in this cosmos that some would describe as magic, and that it is possible for those resolute in will to seize advantage of magic's existence and bend its powerful resources for their own uses. How else to explain why some who are so undeserving have so much, while others who are pure of heart and

soul, like my beautiful Trudy, have so little.

"I will, with an eye toward giving my beloved the stars and more, be exploring this notion further. . . ."

James closed the book and shook his head with a gentle smile. *Magic, huh?* thought the handsome professor. *I suppose if you're left isolated in a place like this long enough, you can end up believing in anything.*

Not that this guy was really all that isolated. This is one of the few lighthouses in existence where you could just walk outside and hike right over to civilization. And he had an assistant to keep him company, and his fiancée, Trudy, came by every chance she got. All things considered, this guy really had it made!

James frowned. *So what made him crazy enough to believe in magic? Was it just living here, in Serenity Cove? This place does seem to have an effect on people. . . .*

He was about to read another passage, when a sudden headache seized him. Resting the book on the windowsill, he attempted to place the pocket watch beside it—and found he could not make his hand release it. His fingers were curled tightly around the watch and no matter how strongly he willed them to let go, they remained cramped around its cold surface. The ticking of the watch suddenly grew louder, every tiny *tick* stabbing at his ears, increasing the pain in his head.

He heard footsteps. Someone else *was* in the lighthouse!

The steps grew louder, louder still, and soon whoever was there should have been standing in plain sight, but James couldn't see anyone!

"You are an explorer," said a voice from the other side of the great searchlight a few feet from the young professor. *"Someone who delves deeply into all of life's mysteries. Poor man, you have no idea how many mysteries extend further than the flesh, and reach down deeper than your limited well of reason can grasp. . . ."*

James shuddered and shook his head, circling around the lamp but seeing no one.

"I have the power to reveal the answers behind all mysteries," promised the voice, that same voice James had heard on the recording. *"I can send you to a place where every truth is laid bare. You have only to let me shine a light to guide you on your journey."*

The endless ticking of the pocket watch echoed from floor to ceiling, growing louder with every passing moment. James struck out with the watch, ready to smash it against the wall even if it meant shattering the bones in his hands in the process, but his fingers froze an inch away from the cold hard stone and would move no closer.

Either he was going crazy—and there really was something to be said for that idea—or an unseen force was preventing him from destroying the pocket watch.

"Come now," urged the voice. *"What would you give? Tell me, what would you give?"*

Clutching at his skull, James sank to his knees, screaming, "Anything! Anything, for pity's sake! Just make it stop!"

"Done."

A sudden burst of emerald and amber light shot from the pocket watch and wrapped around James like a fisherman's net, closing on him with a tight and malevolent grip. He screamed as searing flames burned deep into his flesh, then burrowed deeper, singeing his soul, ravaging his reason.

James felt himself slipping away. *No, this isn't what I wanted!*

Laughter rose up around him as invisible hands clawed and grasped at him—and suddenly he felt an agony worse than any he had ever dreamed possible. It was as if his soul was being torn loose from his body!

And it was.

Wait! This isn't any kind of an answer! You lied to me! You lied!

He had a fleeting glimpse of his own physical form towering above him as he was dragged down into the very stones of the lighthouse walls, his body now a separate alien thing over which he had no control. Most horrible of all, his body grinned down at him and waved, because someone else was now occupying it.

"The answer to all the mysteries," rasped a thick voice rumbling up from somewhere deep within James's stolen flesh. Then, horrifyingly, the voice

sounded exactly like that of James Agatt! "The answer is that there are no answers, only darkness . . . an eternity of darkness and regret!"

The darkness yanked James into itself—and he was gone.

In his place stood a man who had not known the sensation of living for close to a century, a man who had loved and lost and become a spirit of deep, dark vengeance.

In his place, looking to all the world like the handsome James Agatt, stood the keeper. And soon, his vengeance would be complete!

"Why can't we ever run into Casper, or some of the other *friendly* ghosts?" demanded Paige as they hiked up the long, lonely stretch of twisting road to the lighthouse.

Or—it would have been lonely if not for the local kids who dogged the sisters' every step on their squeaky little bicycles.

"If I had known we were going to have company the whole way, I'd have called for a cab!" Piper complained.

Phoebe nodded gravely and took in the scene before her. Most lighthouses were set in highly isolated and remote locations. The task of bringing provisions to the solitary keeper was often a dangerous proposition, so anyone working in a lighthouse had to be immune to the wearing effects of loneliness.

The Serenity Cove lighthouse overlooked a

high span of ragged cliffs, but it was firmly attached to the mainland and was easily reachable by foot from the village. The village had expanded greatly in the last century, edging ever closer to the lighthouse as more and more homes, developments, businesses, and picturesque, winding roads were forged near the tower that provided it with a reliable tourist trade.

The lighthouse itself had been of incredible importance in its day, as the fish in these waters were remarkably plentiful, which lured sailors looking to enter the fishing business. But the shoreline was jagged and uneven, a series of sharp, thrusting stone teeth of every possible length biting into the waves like an angry, hungry mouth. Without the lighthouse, there would have been constant casualties and wreckage.

Phoebe breathed a sigh of relief. The lighthouse was close; she could clearly make out the cottage beside it with its sumptuous garden.

"You want some friendly ghosts, huh?" Piper smiled. "Well, y'know, technically I kinda married one."

Paige shook her head. "Leo doesn't count."

"You tell him that."

Their feet were killing them as they closed on the lighthouse—and saw James emerge to meet them. His jeans hugged his powerful legs, a black turtleneck gripped his muscular torso, and something Phoebe couldn't quite make out was

gripped tightly in his hand. He quickly slipped whatever it was into his pocket.

Phoebe drew a deep breath as she approached her pal's fiancé. He was even better looking in person!

"I'd know you three anywhere," James said warmly, taking Phoebe's hand in both of his. "Lyssa hasn't stopped talking about all of you since the other night!"

"Hopefully that's a good thing," Phoebe said with a grin. She grudgingly took back her hand—what a hot and solid grip he had. Rrrrruff! Absently, she gestured toward her sister. "I'm Phoebe, this is Piper—"

James shook Piper's hand. "Charmed, I'm sure."

Piper grinned. "Actually, you have *no* idea."

"Pardon?"

"Oh, nothing . . ."

"And I'm Paige!" put in the youngest witch, nearly bouncing on her booted feet before she rushed forward and took his powerful hand in both of hers. She too sighed a little as she gazed up into his dreamy eyes. "Y'know, I can totally see why all those talent scouts have tried to get you to do modeling, like Lyssa told us. You'd be incredible!"

James blushed. "That's not me. Besides, if I'd done that, I'd have never met Lyssa, and my life wouldn't have any meaning."

Phoebe felt her heart skip a beat. She had no

idea if this guy was just an expert at delivering lines, but he had gotten to her with nothing more than a look and a couple of words. *He really loves her. Of course, Cole and I really loved each other, too, and look how that turned out!*

"We were kinda wondering if we could look around," Piper said. "You know, inside the lighthouse."

James scratched at his temple. "Oh? Is something the matter?"

"Oh, no!" Phoebe cried a little too broadly. "We just love lighthouses!"

Reaching into his back pocket, James took out an old pocket watch. He scanned the time, nodded, and said, "I don't see any problem with that. We've got plenty of time."

"Great," Phoebe said, feeling a little confused. *Didn't Lyssa say this guy doesn't know what a watch is for?*

James gestured for them to follow him into the lighthouse and said, "I'll give you the grand tour."

An hour later, the sisters were leaving the lighthouse. James smiled warmly as they left. The trio walked back along the path they had taken to reach the lighthouse, waiting until they were a good distance away before speaking.

"So—did either of you pick up any kind of weird vibe from that place?" Phoebe asked at last. "Any sign of ghosts consumed with vengeance or dark magic or anything odd?"

"No-o-o-o," said Piper, drawing the word out. "But I have a sneaking suspicion *you* did, from the way you're asking that."

"Not the place," Phoebe said softly.

"James?" Paige asked, her eyes shooting open wide in surprise. "But he's, like, totally Mister Right. And me, I'd be happy to have him around as Mister Right Now, if you get my meaning."

"The fish in the sea, the rocks on the shore, and the wind in the *hills* all got your meaning," Piper said disapprovingly. "It was pretty hard to miss."

"Speaking of rock hard, did you see his abs when he bent around the light and his shirt rode up?" asked Paige. "I'm tellin' ya, that Lyssa is a total hunk magnet!"

Piper gave up on her man-hungry sister. "Phoebe, keeping in mind it's the ghost and the water creatures we need to be worried about, what was it about James that bothered you?"

"I don't know," Phoebe admitted. "The water creatures could be acting on their own—there may not be any ghost. With James . . . I can't really put it into words."

"Try."

"He just seems too good to be true," said Phoebe. "And normally when someone or something *seems* that way . . ."

"It usually is," finished Piper. She ran her hand through her hair. "Listen, far be it from me to talk like someone who doesn't have issues,

but don't you think it's possible that you're just *looking* for something to be wrong with this guy? You met the guy you thought was your perfect match, and he tried to turn you into the queen of hell. Not the kind of thing to leave you very trusting of the opposite sex."

"You're probably right," said Phoebe as she trudged down the path. "I just want everything to be perfect for Lyssa."

"Then you should trust her judgment. What else can you do?"

Phoebe glanced back at the lighthouse. James was watching them from the observation deck—he waved.

You're watching us? No problem! thought Phoebe. *But I'm watching you, too. . . ."*



Chapter 4

Light fell from Paige in a gentle cascade as she completed her orb to Halliwell Manor. What she saw before her in the living room made her wonder if the brief instant of disorientation she sometimes felt after teleporting over considerable distances was addling her senses.

Leo was on his hands and knees scrubbing the floors with Wyatt strapped to his back like a papoose. Piles of folded-up laundry towered atop a nearby table, along with an array of fuzzy and fluffy feather dusters primed with citrus-scented cleaners and ready for action.

"Well, you're sure getting into it," Paige commented. She raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't want to be a dust mote in this place!"

Leo smiled as he glanced up from his scrubbing. "I find household chores and other aspects of domesticity to be greatly satisfying in an ideal therapeutic sense. I recommend all couples taking turns with them. And for those permanent

stay-at-home males taking care of the kids, being a house-husband should *not* be a dirty word."

Leo's been watching way too many daytime talk shows, Paige mused. *He's becoming Harry Jesse Raphael!*

"Read about it on the Internet," Leo admitted. "It's fascinating all the information that's out there!"

"Right," said Paige with a quick nod. "But right now I need to get some information the old-fashioned way."

He rose and ambled over, wiping his hands with a fresh paper towel he yanked from his pocket. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Maybe," said Paige. "Come on up with me and we'll see."

As they climbed the steps, Paige filled him in on the craziness going on back at the village.

"Playful water spirits, huh?" asked Leo. "From what you've described, my bet would be on nixies."

They entered the attic, Leo, as usual, holding the door open for Paige. Some things never changed, including Leo's old-fashioned manners—and Paige kind of liked that.

"Nixies, huh?" asked Paige as they approached the big black book on the pedestal in the center of the room. "Who are they?"

"The Book of Shadows is right there," Leo said as he shifted Wyatt around and rocked him in his arms. "Look 'em up!"

Paige opened the ancient tome and started to search. "Now let's see . . . nincompoops, no . . . ninnies, no . . . ah, here we are: nixies."

After a few moments of studying the brief entry in the Book of Shadows, Paige whipped the Book shut in frustration. "That's not going to help much."

"Anything on the lighthouse keeper?" asked Leo.

"I didn't see anything. Does that mean he isn't real?"

Leo shook his head. "Hard to say one way or another. I'd just take it that no one in your family ever had run-ins with him, which kinda makes sense."

"Really? How do you figure that?"

"Well, from what you told me about this guy—"

"What the children's author was telling a bunch of toddlers," Paige reminded him.

"Right, but this James guy is researching the truth behind the legends, so there *was* an actual guy—from what you're telling me."

"Yeah, good point," admitted Paige.

"Anyway, I was just thinking that he sounds like the type who might be lying low, biding his time, gathering knowledge and power . . . you know, waiting until the time's right to take his revenge. And if that's the case, he would have avoided situations where it meant tangling with powerful witches."

"So that explains how he might be real, but not mentioned in the Book of Shadows?" asked Paige.

Leo shrugged. "Just a thought. Plus, it's tough for most ghosts to manifest on the mortal plane. And maybe the lighthouse stuff is all just a legend . . . but these nixies are real."

"And real tricky. Sometimes good, sometimes evil, sometimes used by one side or the other, according to the Book . . . sheesh!" Paige ran her hands through her hair. "What I want to know is, how do we stop 'em!"

Leo grinned and glanced down at the cleaning supplies that were still strapped to his tool belt. "I might have an idea that'll help. . . ."

Phoebe pulled the minivan into a narrow, well-shaded parking space at the base of a hill. Stepping out, she adjusted her new sunglasses—a gift from Lyssa—and peered up the tree-enshrouded lane to a well-hidden series of cottages a few miles west of the mansion.

She felt kind of bad about dumping so much of the hard labor for setting up Lyssa's bachelorette party on Piper's shoulders, but the entertainment was already taken care of, and besides, Piper knew parties. The eldest Halliwell really was the one with the most experience with all the nuts and bolts of stuff like booking a place and all that.

And playing detective's a lot more fun, thought Phoebe.

Determined to learn more about the supposed "lighthouse ghost," Phoebe had phoned Jenna Marsten, the author whose reading she had briefly attended that morning. Jenna had been delighted to set aside time to see her.

The lovely old cottages on the road were rustic and neat as a pin. Chalkboards bearing the handwritten names of couples rested on the porches of many of them, close to the front steps and near the gently swaying porch swings.

"It's a honeymoon getaway," someone said softly.

Phoebe turned—and did a double take. Jenna wore jeans, a large flannel shirt, and boots. Large sheers dangled from one of her delicate hands, while the other grasped a basket filled with freshly cut roses.

"I know, it must be disorienting, seeing me out of costume," Jenna said with a laugh. "I'm not as wacky as some people here—I don't dress up in period clothes and walk around like a loon all the time, that was just for the kids. They like it when someone really puts on a show."

"Sure," Phoebe agreed. "I really appreciate your seeing me!"

"I'm just a big ham who loves the sound of her own voice," said Jenna. "So any chance I get to hold court—well, I'm in!"

Phoebe appreciated Jenna's easygoing, self-deprecating ways and had a sense right off that this would be a worthwhile visit. They entered

Jenna's cottage, which sat on the top of the hill, before a thick patch of woods. The cottage directly next to Jenna's belonged to the assistant caretaker, who appeared to be twenty years her senior. Ahead, a few happy couples strolled past them, hand-in-hand, carrying picnic baskets as they headed into the deep, secluded woods.

Inside the cottage, Jenna fixed tea.

"So," began Phoebe, "you run this place?"

"The honeymoon cottages?" asked Jenna. "Own and operate, you bet. Which is kind of funny, all things considered."

Phoebe took a cup of chamomile tea from her host. A delicious and relaxing aroma wafted up to her. "Oh?"

"Sure! You wouldn't have recognized me when I was your age. Nineteen sixty-three. I was a total hippie. I had my hair down to my ankles, lived in a tepee, the whole nine yards. Sure, you could say I was just rebelling against my rich parents, but I believe it was more than that. There's something about living in Serenity Cove. It makes you believe in just about anything, and do the craziest things!"

Phoebe smiled encouragingly. It would explain a lot if Serenity Cove itself were some kind of nexus for the supernatural. "Was it always that way?" she asked as she sipped her tea and looked around at the shelves lined with photos of a young woman at horse shows—

including one at Madison Square Garden. "The town, I mean."

"Right," said Jenna. "You're not here to find out about me, you want to know about the ghost. Just like your friend's handsome groom, that James fellow."

Phoebe felt her stomach muscles contract into a nervous knot. "You've talked to James?"

"Naturally. But I don't think he really expected to learn anything hard-hitting or interesting from a part-time children's book author like me. He was just covering his bases. I'll tell you what I told him: From my research, it appears as if Serenity Cove has been a magnet for strange goings-on since it was first founded in the eighteen twenties. I've seen the ruins of churches that some believe were once used to worship pagan deities from beneath the sea, and I've heard the strange calls of the sea. Then there was this one time I was out skinny-dipping and saw these things that might be mer-creatures. . . ."

"So you don't think it was the loss of his sweetheart that made the lighthouse keeper bonkers?" asked Phoebe, not really anxious to hear about the skinny-dipping part.

"Oh, that was a big part of it, no doubt. But I truly think there are things out there that made him susceptible to certain beliefs long before his light failed and poor Trudy's ship was torn apart as a result."

Phoebe raised an eyebrow. "Things?"

Jenna set her cup down. "I used to go riding on the beach. That's me in those photos you were looking at on the shelves. When I was very young, I loved riding horses. It was the thing to do in a wealthy family like mine, but I took it very seriously. I even participated in championship events."

Phoebe's gaze again drifted to the shot of the young girl at Madison Square Garden. "So what happened?"

"I discovered boys, and lost interest in horses. Five failed marriages later, I realized I should have stuck with the horses!"

Phoebe laughed, the tea going up her nose. "Sorry!"

"No, it *is* funny. But yes, I used to keep horses here, and I would go riding on the beach. And I saw and heard some very odd things, particularly when I came within sight of the lighthouse. The sky turning black at midday, even though there hadn't been a cloud in the sky a moment before, or any eclipse predicted. . . ."

"Really?" Phoebe asked dubiously.

Jenna nodded and continued. "Oh, yes. One day it was tons of sea snakes suddenly washing up onshore, carried on waves that had been calm not long before . . . and the wind carrying music that no earthly instruments could have made . . ." She shuddered. "I had to abandon riding on the shore. No horse would go there."

Setting her own teacup down, Phoebe asked, "What about your research for the book? Newspaper clippings, historical records . . ."

"I have boxes of it in storage," Jenna said sweetly. "If you want, I'll go to the storage facility later today and have it all waiting for you tonight, if you'd like to come back here for it."

And there's the jackpot, thought Phoebe. *Once I have all the facts, I can draw my own conclusions.* "Thank you so much, that would be fabulous."

As Phoebe was getting ready to leave, she turned to Jenna and asked, "Is there anything else that's special about the story of the lighthouse keeper? If there's been so much weirdness in the village over the years, why's his story the one that everyone seems to latch on to?"

Jenna sipped at her chamomile tea as she considered this. At last, she looked up with a warm, compassionate spark in her eyes and said, "Because it's about love, sweetheart. Yes, the story is scary and mysterious, but at the end of the day, it all comes down to love. The keeper was once a man, a man motivated by love, a man who treasured his lady above all things. If he hadn't loved her so much, he might not have gone quite as mad as he did. He was human once. And I would like to think that if his spirit still roams, perhaps it could be convinced to move on if it could only remember what it was to love so deeply . . . to love, not to hate."

"Wow," Phoebe marveled. "And I thought I was the expert on relationships!"

Piper was a block away from the club where the party would be held, when she suddenly got the feeling that she was being followed. She had decided against taking the minivan because she was in no hurry and wanted to enjoy the cool breezes drifting in from the ocean to blanket the village. Now, as she heard a second set of footsteps behind her, she regretted that move.

Fighting the urge to look back suddenly—because she didn't want to let her pursuer know she was on to him or her, not yet, anyway—Piper paused before a store selling curios. She barely noticed the rows of gaudy jewelry adorned with seashells or the signs for old record albums and antique motion-picture flip-books. Her attention was fixed firmly on a pane of glass set at an angle that conveniently afforded her a view of the street behind her.

No one was there.

That's interesting, thought Piper. Either whoever's following me is really good at this, or I just might be dealing with something magical.

She looked down and saw that all the weirdly painted pigeons were scurrying from the sidewalk around her and flocking to the other side of the street.

Yup. Something magical. Birds and animals always know.

Piper continued on her way and carefully studied the storefronts ahead of her, all the while fighting the urge to look back as she heard the footsteps resume behind her. She spotted an open door at the side of the local theater and casually adjusted her direction, hoping that it would look to whoever was pursuing her that this was her intended destination all along.

Piper slipped into the cool recesses of the theater and felt relieved that no one was around to question her. She prowled along a dimly lit corridor and heard raised voices ahead. It sounded like the local diva was back—and in the middle of another hissy fit.

Piper also heard her follower from a dozen paces back. Her trap was almost set. All she had to do was lure her pursuer into someplace dark and deserted, find a hiding place, then wait for whoever—or whatever—it was to catch up and rush past her. Then she could get the drop on the follower and find out what this was all about.

Right on cue, Piper spotted a door leading to a dressing room. She ducked into the darkened space, hid behind the door, and waited.

The footsteps grew louder and louder still. The person or *thing* following her was nearly at the door.

Suddenly, the footsteps stopped.

Piper raised her hands, ready to defend herself by using her power to explode objects, and

listened carefully. There was nothing to hear. Not even breathing.

In the distance, she heard the diva holler, "I'm leaving and I'm not coming back!"

Someone else yelled, "Promises, promises!"

Angry footsteps rang along the corridor outside the darkened makeup room. The diva, Piper presumed. And the woman didn't slow down for an instant, which she probably would have if someone or something strange were standing in the doorway.

Lowering her hands, Piper stepped out from behind the door and peered into the corridor. No one was there.

A silly old song her dad used to sing darted into Piper's thoughts: *Last night, I saw a man who wasn't there. He wasn't there again today. I wish, I wish he'd go away.*

Piper stole from the theater without being seen by any of the employees or volunteers. She stood on the sidewalk, this time making a show of looking all around as if she had been given directions that were proving to be confusing. She saw no one.

Was it the keeper? Piper wondered. *We don't even know if he exists or not, but ghosts are the best at not being seen unless they want to be.*

As she walked down the street, she realized that she had simply made up her mind about her follower being a magical thing because of the odd behavior of the pigeons. She studied

the brilliantly painted birds—and saw that they were now flocking toward this side of the street.

“Okay, that’s weird,” she muttered. Then she saw a tubby older gentleman in a paint-spattered smock stalking along the other side of the street. He carried a can of spray-paint in either hand. The pigeon painter was here. No wonder the birds were avoiding him.

Frowning, Piper decided that it wasn’t likely that the pigeon painter was her pursuer. The man’s footsteps were loud, heavy clunks because of his rubber boots, not the soft padding of flat soles she had heard earlier.

As she walked, the echoing footsteps resumed behind her. Piper crossed the street, curious to see if she could catch sight of her follower as he, she, or it crossed with her, but a sudden flow of cars blocked her view. She reached the other side of the street and approached Old Mavis’s place—only to stop suddenly as the old lady burst from her cookie and cake shop and flung her hands up in warning.

Old Mavis cried, “Look out for that—”

Piper looked up and saw a bucket of water tied to the steel support of an awning overhead. A burst of evil, childish laughter rang out as a rope attached to the bucket was pulled taught and a torrent of icy water splashed down on her head. Sputtering and shivering in the breeze, the drenched Piper shuddered in fury as a handful

of boys leaped out from their hiding places in the shadows near another storefront.

"Gotcha, gotcha!" the boys hollered as they ran away.

Old Mavis approached and hefted her broom. "Now you know why I always keep this handy. Want to borrow it?"

Piper sighed, forced a smile into place, and said, "No thanks."

"Suit yourself!"

Old Mavis went back to her shop and Piper sloshed off toward the club. She'd dry off there.

As she walked on, she considered that she had honestly thought that something supernatural had been after her. And as the water splashed her, she thought it might have been the work of the water thingees they had faced in the dress shop. Now she wondered if it had just been the neighborhood boys the whole time.

Still, what had happened in the theater had been spooky. . . .

Piper's brow furrowed as an idea came to her. She looked back to the still swinging bucket that the neighborhood boys had filled with water. They needed to work out a trap for the water thingees, just in case the creatures made an appearance at the bachelorette party. A simple bucket of water trick like that just might come in handy!

Piper crossed the street and thought she heard the footsteps again. But when she looked back, no one was there.

Last night, I saw a man who wasn't there, she thought. He wasn't there again today. I wish, I wish he'd go away.

The mansion was buzzing with activity when Phoebe returned. A limo was parked out front, and a dozen wedding attendees were huddled together in the lobby. Phoebe heard a raucous and highly distinctive laugh from the center of the group—and knew at once that Lyssa's parents had arrived!

The tight gathering broke up quickly as Lyssa waved Phoebe over and Mom and Pop Ainsley flung open their arms, squashing Phoebe between them. Piper and Paige, who had already received their greetings, stood by and smiled. And when Phoebe was finally granted a chance to catch her breath, the young, attractive witch found herself facing a barrage of questions from the happy parents.

"Honey, are you eating right?" asked Lyssa's mom. "You look a little flushed. That could mean a little too much red cabbage in your diet. Then again, it could mean not enough."

Lyssa's dad rolled his eyes. "Ada, please! What's *really* important is how you girls are doing with the upkeep of that old drafty place of yours in San Francisco. You take care of your home, it'll take care of you."

"You're saying flushing like that could mean poor insulation at home, Bob?" asked Ada.

"Possibly," said her husband.

Phoebe smiled and stopped herself from adding, *I may be flushed because you two just crushed my ribs. . . .*

"Phoebe, you really should let me take a look at the place the next time we're in the city!"

"Sounds like a great idea to me," Piper said, still grinning. "And Phoebe can show you all around the newsroom where she works!"

"Uh, right," Phoebe said, wishing she could kick her sister without Lyssa's folks noticing.

"And Phoebe can get some dating advice from you too," Paige added. "She's always saying that she could use a different point of view. . . ."

"Consider it a done deal!" promised Bob.

Phoebe shot daggers at her sisters with her gaze, but they were too busy keeping themselves from laughing to notice. Of course, it wasn't that any of them would truly wish to avoid spending time with Lyssa's folks, it was simply that the Ainsleys had a gift for taking over people's lives whenever they could. They viewed most of Lyssa's friends as "projects."

But all in all, Lyssa's parents were just as sweet as Phoebe remembered, true salt-of-the earth. Pop was a retired plumber, Mom a former nurse. But the couple had always lived with their heads in the clouds, quoting lines from old black-and-white movies to each other, or spontaneously breaking into Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers-inspired dance moves anywhere, anytime.

Inheriting a fortune hadn't changed them one bit. Bob still wiped his hands on his well-worn workshirt after a snack, and Ada worried like a mother hen over anyone who so much as sniffled in her presence. And . . . they danced.

"Gotta sing!" Bob cried, whipping Ada around as if they were in a ballroom. "Gotta dance! Gotta make with a little romance!"

Lyssa half buried her face in her hands as if she was mortified, but she peeked at her parents between her fingers and giggled like a schoolgirl over their antics.

"Promise you won't embarrass me with your crazy moves at the wedding!" Lyssa pleaded mockingly.

"We promise no such thing, darling," Ada said as she was dipped.

"And if we did," added Bob, "you'd wonder who had spirited away your real parents and replaced them with imposters."

"Yeah, and *that* kind of thing never happens," Phoebe said in an odd, reflective tone. She realized that she couldn't even count how many times it *had* happened in her experience!

Phoebe suddenly realized that all three Ainsleys—and her sisters Piper and Paige—were looking at her oddly. "It *never* does, I mean. Right?"

The soft patter of boots announced the groom's arrival. James kissed Lyssa and submitted to the standard round of bear hugs and a

mini-inquisition before the parents settled down to some serious business.

"We've got a surprise for you," her dad said as he grinned at his only daughter. "An early wedding present."

"Enough with the buildup!" cried her mother. "I want to see my baby's face when she gets a load of this!"

Lyssa's dad drew a medium-size black jeweler's box from his back pocket and opened it with a great dramatic flare. Something within caught a streaking ray of light and prismatic shards of gold struck out in every direction.

"This, my dear, is the Light of the World!" announced Lyssa's dad. "And as of right this minute, it's yours!"

The Light of the World was a yellow diamond big enough to take up most of someone's palm. It shimmered and gleamed from its ornate octagonal setting, dangling seconds later from the necklace Lyssa's dad held up before her.

"You can't be serious," Lyssa whispered breathlessly. "You want me to have this?"

"Nothing would make us happier," her mother told her as she slipped the necklace around her daughter's long, lean neck and closed the clasp behind her.

James looked on, entranced by the rock.

Phoebe grinned. "Wow, Lyssa . . . remember when we were kids and we played dress-up, and you always said you didn't have any nice

jewelry to wear? You were holding out on us, girlfriend!"

Lyssa laughed.

Piper shook her head. "It's amazing!"

Paige nodded enthusiastically.

"Just try not to get your picture taken too much while you're wearing it," Ada advised. "International jewel thieves read the paper, I'm telling you!"

"You're talking about that old movie you like so much," Lyssa realized, "the one that takes place on the Riviera!"

"*It Takes a Thief!*" her dad exclaimed. "Cary Grant in one of his finest roles!"

"Well, I'll stick with the real world, thanks . . ." Lyssa said. She absently brushed the amazing diamond with her long fingers. "Which means having you guys take it back to the vault right after the wedding!"

Phoebe noticed that James couldn't take his eyes off the rock. He stared at the diamond as if it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life. "It's amazing!"

Of course, Piper and Paige were so busy chitchatting with Lyssa that they really didn't notice.

"Hey," Phoebe said to James, an edge of impatience creeping into her voice, "aren't you supposed to be looking at your bride-to-be like that?"

James laughed and tore his gaze from the

Light of the World—but the effort appeared to be draining. And Phoebe thought the smile he regaled Lyssa with somehow seemed hollow and false.

Suddenly, Piper smacked her own forehead. "Phoebe, I forgot to tell you. You just got a message from Jenna Marsten, that nice lady who writes the children's books? She wanted to remind you to pop over anytime after nine and she should have what you're looking for."

Lyssa's gaze widened and she squeezed her fiancé's arm. "Phoebe, if you want to know anything there is to know about that old lighthouse, you should just ask my James here. There isn't anything he doesn't know!"

"Sounds like a plan to me," said Paige.

"Right," added Piper. "What do you think, James?"

James didn't seem to be listening. His gaze was now fixed to an old pocket watch he held in his hand. He looked lost in its wonders, oblivious to anything and everything going on around him.

Phoebe was glad that James was playing the absentminded professor yet again. The last thing she needed was some long-winded, academic recitation about points of history surrounding the lighthouse and that kind of nonsense. All she wanted to know is whether this wedding was haunted or not!

Lyssa cleared her throat. "Sweetheart? What's that?"

James tore his gaze from the pocket watch. "Just something I found on the shore. Can you believe it's still working?"

"I should take off," Phoebe said, backing away swiftly, relieved that James did not look up. "Your maid of honor has her work cut out for her tonight, ya know. Miles to go, all that good stuff. *Love* the diamond—it really is something!"

Phoebe nodded to Paige and Piper. "You ladies have a minute?"

Her sisters rushed over to join her.

Out of the corner of her eye, Phoebe thought she saw James look up and fix her with a cold and piercing glare. But when she glanced back in his direction, he was laughing and chatting away with Lyssa and her parents, his hand slowly sliding the old watch back into his pocket.

Jenna Marsten hauled the last of the heavy file boxes into her cabin and kicked her door shut. She had never considered herself a true journalist—her writing career had begun simply because she needed to get all the stories she'd heard of Serenity Cove out of her head *somehow* and a friend suggested writing a book. So the idea of spending the evening poring over her research with a real journalist like Phoebe was worth all the minor aches and pains she would get from hauling these boxes around.

With a grunt she dropped the box in the corner, near her antique roll-up desk where she had written most of her book the old-fashioned way—longhand, on reams and reams of paper. She had hired a temp to key her words into a word-processing program on the computer in her office.

With a sigh, Jenna plopped down into her easy chair and jumped as a drop of water struck her cheek. She wiped it away, thinking she had broken into a sweat, but then another drop fell, and another. Gazing up, she saw beads of water gathering on the ceiling, dripping down dangerously along the hanging light fixtures. Just before the room was plunged into near darkness, she thought she saw something that couldn't be possible:

The droplets on the ceiling had formed words:

IT MUST BE THE GHOST

Jenna gasped as the lights flickered and failed. She rocked to her feet, but a sudden driving wind struck her and pounded her back down. The wind circled around her, brushing her hair, tickling the nape of her neck, an unnatural wind that could not be coming from any open window—they were all closed.

A fire roared to life in the fireplace, and the dark, silhouetted figure of a man wearing a

heavy coat and carrying a pipe turned to face her.

Fear stole the breath from Jenna's lungs as she recognized her visitor.

"You've been talking out of turn, my dear," said the keeper's shadowy form. "Whatever happened to journalistic integrity? You never even *tried* to reach me for an interview. . . ."

Jenna screamed as the keeper rushed at her.



Chapter 5

The dark crimson hues of dusk stretched across the sky as a handful of stars twinkled above the Wagon Wheel Pub. Phoebe led her sisters inside, and the smell of sawdust rose to greet them. The pub had once been a stagecoach stop, and the walls were plastered with old handbills and yellowing newspapers. An ornate chandelier radiated the pub with a warm bronze glow. The walrus-mustached bartender polished glasses while smiling at his eye-catching, slyly grinning daughters. The girls served as waitresses and darted expertly between canvas-covered tables without ever spilling a drop of the drinks arrayed on their trays. An old guy wearing a dust-colored, fringed, Western-style jacket sat at the piano, playing music from a century earlier. The bartender wore a cowboy hat, and a black vest over his billowy white shirt. The waitresses were dressed as cowgirls.

The sisters found Lyssa sitting with a trio of

her younger cousins, whom she introduced and quickly shooed away. "This is no place for you three tonight," she said.

The girls chorused their disappointment, then got on their cell phones and ambled out of the pub.

Phoebe, Paige, and Piper sat with their friend as one of the waitresses came by, whipping out a pad and pen as if they were six-shooters. Lyssa ordered a salad and iced tea, and the Charmed Ones asked for the same.

Phoebe laughed. "I guess we're all watching our figures!"

Leaning back in her chair, Piper stretched, allowing her halter-top to ride up and expose her lean smooth belly. "Yep, and I'm *finally* getting my figure back after giving birth to my darling boy—what a lot of fun that was, I'm telling you!"

"Look out," Phoebe warned. "This is how it starts. She sits there complaining about motherhood, but before you know it, she'll be trying to find out if you and James are planning to have a family."

"Phoebe!" Piper said, gently kicking her sister under the table with her designer boots. "I do not do that."

"Yes, you do, and I know *all* the signs," boasted Phoebe. "I write an advice column, I know these things. New parents want to share it all—the joys, the miseries . . . and they want

everyone they come in contact with to join up and be a part of the baby club. It's like pod people trying to take over people's bodies, and the only way to fight it is to get the new mommy totally zonkered." Phoebe raised her hand to the waitress. "Rum and Cokes all around!"

"I don't *think* so," Piper said urgently. "Not to be a wet blanket or anything, but all three of us need to be at the top of our game to make sure this is a perfect night for our pal. Right, Ms. Maid of Honor?"

"Yeah, yeah . . .," Phoebe said, shooing away the waitress, who was doubling back. "Ixnay on the booze. Iced tea's fine."

"Anyway," Piper said, leaning in close to Lyssa, "what about it? Thinking about having kids? I mean, I can tell you stories . . ."

Soon, the waitress returned with drinks and salads. And even when Piper dug into her salad, she showed no signs of letting up with her Wyatt stories—darling stories that they were, even with the magical elements carefully edited out. Phoebe teased her sister now and then, but she understood how difficult it was for Piper to be separated from her son for even this short—and welcome—break from all the recent craziness. In fact, Phoebe was about to raise her glass and propose a toast to her big sister when she noticed what was going on inside the glass sitting on the table next to Lyssa.

The iced tea within the glass was swirling

around as if a mini-maelstrom was attacking it.

"Uh-oh," Phoebe said, the rattling of the ice cubes in Lyssa's glass matching the rattling of her nerves at the thought of the watery wedding crashers returning.

Piper went on. "So I'm not saying anyone should or shouldn't have kids. It really comes down to what's right for each of us, but for me, now that I have Wyatt, I couldn't imagine—"

"Oh, my gosh!" Phoebe cried suddenly. "Who's that hot guy! Is that James?"

Everyone's head turned, and Phoebe grabbed Paige's arm and nodded down toward the whirlpool within the Lyssa's glass.

"Yikes," Paige whispered. She orbled the glass away before it could explode.

Lyssa shrugged. "I don't see anyone."

"Oh, trick of the light," Phoebe said. "I guess I've got men on the brain."

"Sounds like you," Piper chided.

"That's weird," Lyssa said softly as she looked down at the table. "My drink's gone. I never even saw the waitress. Did any of you?"

"They move quickly around here," Paige said. "Sneaky types. Gotta watch 'em every minute!"

Lyssa laughed. "I guess so. I'm not really that thirsty, anyway."

"Speaking of James, what's he up to tonight?" asked Phoebe. "Are his buddies throwing him a bachelor party?"

Lyssa shook her head. "Nobody's here to do it. His best man won't even get here until tomorrow morning. James is probably just hanging around the lighthouse, I'd imagine. Although..."

Phoebe caught the worried look in Lyssa's eyes. "Although what?"

Lyssa shrugged. "He said he might drop by here for a second before the party started. And he said if he did, it would be at seven sharp, not a minute later. It's two minutes to seven now."

Piper's forehead creased. "Is he always such a stickler about being on time?"

"Well, it's funny . . .," Lyssa said softly. "The truth is, James has never been on time for anything in his life. But ever since this afternoon, he's not just on time, he's early, and I mean every time, and he's annoyed when anything isn't running perfectly on time."

"Did you ask him about it?" asked Phoebe.

Lyssa blushed. "I did. He said he wanted to turn over a new leaf, and he didn't want me to worry for one second that he wouldn't be at the wedding on time or that anything else would go wrong, not if he could help it. 'Not on my watch,' he said. He was so . . . gallant about it. It's strange, but I kind of like this new side to him!"

"Well, sure!" added Paige festively. "What woman doesn't want her guy to take things that matter to her seriously, right?"

Piper shrugged. "It sounds to me like typical pre-wedding jitters."

"He's not having second thoughts or anything," Lyssa said quickly.

"No, sweetie, of course not. I'm sure he isn't. I just mean that getting married is stressful."

Phoebe chimed in. "And that's not a bad thing. See, in psychology, you learn that there are all kinds of stress. Some are bad, but some are good. Getting married to the love of your life definitely falls into the good category, but it's still stress, which just means it requires a lot of energy and focus and being 'on' all the time, worrying about so many things. . . ."

Lyssa grinned. "I've been checking the weather service's Web site every hour on the hour since I got up."

Phoebe tossed up her hands. "See? And is that pretty much the exact opposite of what you would normally be doing?"

"I get your point," Lyssa said. She looked a lot better. Smiling, she rose and headed for the ladies' room. Phoebe was about to join her when Piper gently took her arm.

"I'm kind of surprised you're defending this guy," revealed Piper.

"Yeah," added Paige. "I thought you were the one who thought he might be a low-down dirty dog in disguise."

"Well, I never said *that*," Phoebe offered. "I just don't want Lyssa worrying."

"Right," said Piper. "That's what you're here for."

Phoebe grinned. "As her maid of honor? Yeah! And as her friend, too."

The trip to the restroom was a short walk down a sawdust-strewn corridor. Phoebe turned a corner—and was surprised to see James standing alone in the darkness near the exit. He was staring at his pocket watch and frowning severely.

"I told her when I would be here," he whispered to himself. "Foolish girl. I have no time to wait around!"

Phoebe didn't like the sound of that—or the look of James's sour expression. And then there was his obsession with that watch. He carried it everywhere and looked at it with the fondness of a man who had just reclaimed a precious belonging that he thought was lost forever.

Weird.

"She's in the ladies' room," Phoebe said crossly, startling James. "I guess she thought you weren't coming."

"I'm never late," James said stiffly. "Not anymore. But I do have to run. Probably best not to mention that you saw me here."

Phoebe nodded suspiciously. James really wasn't acting himself—or was he? How much did they really know about this guy beyond what Lyssa had told them?

James went out the back door, brushing against a tall guy who took that opportunity to slip inside. The red-haired newcomer regaled

Phoebe with a disarmingly sly smile of welcome, then slipped off his designer shades and slid them into the pocket of his long black leather jacket. A briefcase and a boom box had been set down beside him.

"Here I am," the stunningly attractive man said. "The party may officially begin!"

Phoebe shooed him back outside as Lyssa emerged from the ladies' room. The moment her friend was out of view, Phoebe called to a passing waitress and asked her to grab her sisters and bring them out back.

In the parking lot behind the pub, the man stood beneath a shower of fine white light filtering down from a halogen light set against the wall. The stark light stole down and around the contours of his elegantly sculpted features, alighting along his high cheekbones, full lips, and square chin. In fact, the light, and the *heat* from the light, appeared to gather upon him, as if he was calling them to him with some supernatural power.

And he was.

"Quit it," Phoebe said, elbowing her companion.

"Come on," he said. "If you want, I can fix it so people say you're just *glowing* all the time!"

Phoebe growled low and deep in her throat as the door swung open and her fellow Charmed Ones appeared.

"So this is the guy, huh?" asked Paige. "He's cute, I'll give him that."

"What, no proper introduction?" asked the flame-haired man.

"Whatever," Phoebe said with a roll of her eyes. "Simon, who'll be dancing for us tonight, meet my sisters Paige and Piper."

"Excellent," he said, a devilish fire literally burning in the dark recesses of his pupils.

"Another firestarter?" asked Paige.

"Not exactly," Phoebe assured her. "Simon, beyond being our entertainment for the bachelorette party, is an incubus."

"Half-incubus," Simon corrected.

"I met Simon a while back," Phoebe explained. "He helped me out of a jam, I helped him get on the straight and narrow."

"Straight and narrow, huh?" asked Paige as she drifted closer to the handsome guy. She seemed entranced. Simon reached out to brush a lock of hair from Paige's stunning face.

Phoebe's hand shot out—and she slapped Simon's wrist.

"Ow!" he yelped.

"No *powers*," Phoebe reminded him. "That was the deal."

"I wasn't using them," he said, barely restraining a pout. "I can't help it if I exude a certain natural raw charisma. That's why you asked me to do this, isn't it?"

"Right," said Piper. "But keep the exuding to a minimum, pal. 'Kay?"

He shrugged.

"An incubus, huh?" asked Paige. "Like some kind of Lust Demon?"

"With a limited control over flame," Phoebe said. "Simon can draw the passion out of those who see him and turn it into living fire that seeps into his skin and makes him stronger."

"Right," he said. "But I don't do that anymore." His eyebrow raised. "Unless you happen to have an extra twenty-five dollars . . ."

Piper dug her hands in her pockets and rocked back and forth. "What are we paying this guy?"

"We're not," Phoebe said. "He owes me one."

"More than one," Simon said coyly. "As many as you like, hot stuff."

With a sigh, Phoebe smacked him with a light sharp backhanded slap.

He darted back, out of the light, his hand suddenly covering a red welt on his cheek. "Hey!"

"Kinda like dogs," Phoebe said. "Squirt guns are the best, but when you have to make do, a little smack with a rolled up newspaper to let 'em know they've made a mistake. Doesn't really hurt—"

"Yes, it did!" Simon hollered.

"And it gets the job done." Phoebe slapped her hands together and turned to face the entertainer. "Now remember, no funny business tonight if you want to avoid a one-way trip to Siberia or someplace even *colder*," Phoebe chided the handsome, fiery-haired, flame-wielding former

incubus. "If I see you so much as offer to light someone's cigarette, you're outta here."

Catching on quickly, Paige nodded and motioned with her hands as if she were going to orb him right then and there.

Simon smiled and winked at the lovely witches. "You don't have to worry about me ladies," he reassured them. "I am *totally* under control." He smirked and raised an eyebrow as he cast his gaze toward one of the waitresses, who was going off shift and sashaying across the parking lot. She smiled at Simon, who rewarded her with a little wave. "Of course, if there are some really *hot* women here . . ."

"Simon . . .," Phoebe said threateningly.

He laughed. "I was just thinking you might have to worry about some of the ladies. I mean, I can't be held responsible for their actions once they get a look at *this* bod."

Simon whipped off his black leather coat to reveal a bare and perfectly muscled torso.

Paige let out a quiet sigh.

Phoebe glared at the entertainer. "You know, I can think of worse places to send you than Siberia. We could ship you back home to that loving wife of yours—and your mother-in-law."

Simon blanched and hurriedly slipped his jacket back on. "All right," cried Simon. "I promise to be good. I promise!"

Phoebe held out an amulet that bore a Celtic rune and looked as if it had been carved from

ice. "Well, just in case you can't help yourself, we've got this for you."

Simon happily snatched the amulet from Phoebe's palm—and shivered. "Oooh, *chilly*," he said with a robust laugh. "I like it!" He turned it over in his hand a few more times then looked up at the lovely ladies. "So what do I do with it? It doesn't have a chain or anything, and there's nothing I'm wearing that we could pin it to or—"

Phoebe took hold of Simon's hand and eased his open palm toward a section of his chest that was still bared from between the lapels of the still open coat. There was a slight sizzle—and the talisman's symbol was tattooed above his heart.

"Cool!" Simon said.

"Precisely," Phoebe added. "The ice can't be melted, so there's no way you'll overheat with that enchantment on you. I whipped it up special, just for you."

"You spoil me."

"Naw—she really just doesn't trust you to behave," Piper said frankly, "but we still need you to help trap the nixies, who have already showed up."

Simon nodded. Phoebe had already explained all about the madness at the dress shop and the Charmed Ones' plan to use him in their scheme to stop the mischievous creatures once and for all.

"Like I said before, count me in," said Simon. "After the way Phoebe helped me when I decided I wanted to be good, I'd do anything for you three." His eyebrow arched as he looked at Paige, who was still flushed. "And I mean *anything*."

"Okay, that's enough, save it for the show," urged Piper. "Move it along, nothing to see, folks!"

Simon was ushered inside and "backstage"—in other words, into the bar's kitchen—and the Charmed Ones returned to Lyssa, who was sitting with three of her pals. Next to Lyssa was her blond knockout friend Bernadette, who worked part-time as a catalog model; Connie, a silken-haired massage therapist; and Elaine, an older African-American woman who was surprisingly nimble and ran one of Lyssa's dance studios.

Soon, a gaggle of gifts were brought out and Lyssa opened them one by one as all her guests gathered around. Lyssa understood that the whole point of the gift giving was to make her blush, and she gladly gave in to the urge whenever it came upon her.

"Ah," said Lyssa. "Gift certificates to every restaurant in town because, goodness knows, I can't cook!"

Laughter abounded from the crowd.

Lyssa unwrapped her next present, a book titled *Knowledge of Men*. She flipped through the pages, confusion worrying her brow for an instant, then she smirked.

She held it up to her pals so they could see that it was a very thin book—and most of the pages were blank.

"That reminds me of one," Connie said. "How do you know your man's lying? His lips are moving!"

Phoebe nodded, thinking of her demonic ex as she joined the others in another round of good-natured laughter.

"Last one," Lyssa said. She unwrapped a large bottle labeled Anti-Snoring Medicine.

"That way, you can get some sleep after you're married," called Elaine, her words followed by more bursts of laughter.

After opening presents, the group shared a few rounds of stories, jokes, and drinks. They had just burst into explosive laughter after another one of Connie's jokes when the lights dimmed.

Suddenly, low, bassy thundering electronic music poured from a boom box set behind the bar. "Ladies, ladies, ladies!" cried a prerecorded voice. "We give you the one, the only . . ."

Lyssa's face turned bright crimson. "Phoebe, what did you do?"

Phoebe grinned. "You'll see."

"Simon Blaze!"

As the music swelled, Simon burst from the shadows and leaped up onto the bar. A spotlight struck him as he shook his hips, now clothed in a luxurious red velvet robe.

"Woo-hoo!" cried Phoebe, leading the others in a series of wolf whistles.

Lyssa shook her head, buried her face in her hands—and didn't miss a chance to peek as Simon danced. Phoebe looked up at the prop the bartender had installed for her earlier, then saw that the mustached man was standing at the end of the bar, waiting for her signal.

The prop was a teetering bucket of water balanced right over Simon's sinuously strutting form.

"Is it getting hot in here or is it just me?" asked Lyssa, fanning herself.

And with that, Simon whipped off his robe—and hurled it to the bride-to-be! She yelped—and laughed as she flung it to her friends!

Come on, thought Phoebe, somehow managing to tear her gaze away from the glistening—and glittering—body of the reformed Tempter Demon.

As Simon's muscles coiled—all to the cries of the crowd—Phoebe saw the beads of sweat flying from his body stop in midair, then swirl around like spinning tops.

"Bingo!" Phoebe whispered. The nixies were taking the bait!

Phoebe winked at Simon, who nodded, and leaped down before Lyssa.

"Think of me as your teacher," Simon said as he gathered the giggling, writhing Lyssa into his arms, swept her off her feet, and carried her back

onto the bar. "And it's time for some one-on-one tutoring, young lady!"

He set her down and began dancing beside her. Every woman in the place howled with approval, except Phoebe, who was carefully watching the scene unfold and waiting for just the right moment.

Above, the bucket of water, attached to a tether that led to the hidden bartender, began rocking and swaying violently, as if it—or something within it—was alive.

Phoebe was about to signal the bartender to haul on the cord when a handful of those still whirling drops of liquid next to Simon suddenly whipped back and struck the talisman tattooed into his flesh!

Paige grabbed Phoebe's arm. "What's happening to the talisman?"

Eyes widening, Phoebe could only watch as the talisman suddenly changed shape, reappearing as the amulet that it had been before Phoebe used magic to make it one with Simon's skin. Steam burst along its surface—and it melted away!

"Oh, no," Piper whispered. "The nixies are onto us!"

"Whoa!" Simon screamed. Without the talisman to hold his power in check, Simon could do nothing as the outpouring of pure heat from the crowd roared into his body like an out-of-control freight train—and set him on fire!

Scorching flames raced up along his arms and

chest, fire flared from Simon's eyes and mouth, and a blinding light burst from him as if he were a star that had suddenly gone nova.

Shrieks rocketed from the crowd. Lyssa backed away and would have fallen from the bar's suddenly red-hot surface—if Simon hadn't reached out and grabbed her. The flames shrank away from his hand as he exerted all his will to keep his fingers cool for the few precious seconds needed to save the young bride from falling.

Piper raised her hands to freeze the scene before things could get any crazier, but bottles suddenly began to explode behind the bar, the sound startling both the bartender and the Charmed One. The tether slipped from the bartender's hand and the bucket suddenly overturned, dumping the liquid that Phoebe had mystically enchanted onto Simon.

Lyssa leaped away just in time to avoid being splashed, and two of her pals caught her on the way down. But on the stage, the fiery Simon howled in frustration as the waters fell on him and instantly turned his flame to golden glowing foam that soon settled into a bubbling, gooey, honeylike glue that sapped his strength. With a loud, wet moan he sank upon the bar and flopped down onto his face.

"Simon . . .," whispered Phoebe.

The incubus managed a halting thumbs-up to let her know he was incapacitated, but otherwise all right.

Phoebe saw a figure made of swirling water take a step in Lyssa's direction—and explode in a watery torrent as Piper raised her hands and hit it with everything she had!

The Charmed Ones took in the chaos around them and waited for the nixies to attack again . . . but nothing happened.

Looking at Lyssa's confused expression, Phoebe understood why the nixies had given up so easily: They had done their job. The party had been turned upside down and ruined.

"Wow, what special effects can do these days," Phoebe said quickly. "Better than David Copperfield, huh?"

Simon tried to rise—and flopped back down in a *sploosh* of honey-goo. "Ughhh . . ."

And that was that. The Charmed Ones did their best to restore a sense of fun to the evening, but most people cleared out quickly. Thankfully, they all believed that Simon's fire "trick" had been a part of his act. In Serenity Cove—why not?

Lyssa stood by the door with two of her pals while the Charmed Ones tended to Simon, whose skin was still burning under the amber goo.

"How do we put him *out*?" asked Piper.

"How would I know?" replied Phoebe.

Paige frowned. "How do we get him unstuck?"

Keeping a careful watch on the bride across the room, Phoebe said, "I just wish I understood

what happened! The plan was perfect. The nixies would see the bucket of water hanging over Simon for his big 'SplashDance' finale. But when Lyssa was on the stage with him, well, what better time to make sure it tips over, right? They wanted to get her, what better shot would they have? So they'd go and jump into the bucket and, *wham*, we'd have them, 'cause the water was treated with a spell to trap magical beings!"

"It just didn't happen," said Piper. "They made the water swish around, I saw it, but they weren't in it."

"Nope," agreed Phoebe. "They outsmarted us again, which is pretty annoying, I've got to say!" The witches hovered over poor Simon.

"So . . .," Paige began helplessly. "What kind of spell do you think can undo this?"

"Well, there was that one we used when those creepy spider-people were sticking people to walls," Phoebe said with a shrug. "That got them loose in a hurry!"

"Sounds good to me," Piper agreed.

Phoebe cleared her throat.

*For those who don't want to stick around,
Your freedom's at hand and shall be found!*

Simon moaned and slid off the bar. The sisters helped the goo-covered dancer to his feet.

"I'll get him home," volunteered Paige.

"Yeah, well, get right back, and no funny business!" commanded Piper.

"Aye-aye," said the disappointed Paige as she helped the humbled entertainer into the kitchen—and orbbed him away.

Phoebe heard footsteps behind her. When she turned, she found Lyssa standing before her, tears streaking down her face.

"Oh, hon, come on," said Phoebe reassuringly as she swept the bangs from before Lyssa's eyes. "I know tonight didn't go exactly as planned, but the important thing is the wedding tomorrow. Your big day!"

"Uh-huh," Lyssa said, so upset, her body was shaking. "I just got a call from the caterer . . . the food's ruined. Everything. It's either boiled, baked, fried, or turned into slush. Nobody knows how any of it happened, but that freezer where it was all being kept outside, the one the size of a barn? Someone's turned it into a swimming pool!"

Phoebe and Piper silently exchanged knowing looks. The nixies had employed misdirection yet again. While the Charmed Ones attempted to trap one or two of them here at the pub, the rest were wreaking havoc with the food for the wedding.

"I don't understand it," said the distraught Lyssa. "It's like my wedding's cursed!"

The night air was brisk as Phoebe quickly covered the short distance between the pub and Jenna's cottage. *Your wedding's not cursed*, Phoebe

thought, her mind still stuck in that terrible moment when despair flooded over poor Lyssa at the pub. *At least—I hope not. But if it is, we'll find the jerks that did it and make them sorry!*

Yeah, you bet we will!

Yeah . . .

By the time she was in sight of the place, Phoebe had been so overwhelmed by a feeling of disaster that she broke into a run.

She stopped dead within a dozen yards of the front door.

Jenna's cottage was wrecked. It looked like a tornado had been let loose inside the place . . . just like what happened to the lawyer in the story about the lighthouse keeper that Jenna had been reading to those kids.

Phoebe took a closer look around the cottage's exterior. It wasn't nearly as bad as what had happened in the story. When the keeper had taken vengeance against the man he believed had killed his sweetheart, the scene he had left behind had been waterlogged, not just unruly, and the furnishings and everything else in that small, enclosed room were pulverized. Now, peering inside through one of the shattered windows, Phoebe could see that Jenna's place simply looked ransacked.

Jenna's desk had been turned over, some of her chairs had been broken, her knickknacks were swept from their shelves, and some windows and mirrors had been shattered. Something

had happened here, all right, but as Phoebe eased around to the front door and went inside, she saw no blood, no signs that Jenna had actually been hurt.

"Hello?" someone called from outside. "Hello, is anyone there?"

Phoebe didn't recognize the woman's voice. "In here!"

A thin, birdlike figure appeared in the doorway, framed by the moonlight. The elderly woman—Jenna's assistant—pulled her thick winter coat up around her neck and trembled as Phoebe drew near her.

"Do you have any idea what happened here?" asked Phoebe. "Or where Jenna is?"

The older lady shook her head. "I didn't see much. About a half hour ago I was driving up here, heading to my parking spot, when I saw Jenna run out of her cottage and head right to her car. I slowed down and called to her to see if everything was all right, and she started screaming at me to get out, to get out while I still could. Then she started her car and sped out of here. I don't know what was going through her mind, but she had the look of someone who wanted this place behind her."

"But you didn't see anything happen here?" asked Phoebe. "You didn't see anyone else hanging around?"

The old lady shivered. "To be honest, the sight of Jenna running and hollering like that

scared me something awful. I sat in my parking spot for a little while thinking about getting out of my car and going home, but all I could see were broken windows and I just didn't know what to do. So I pulled out again and just drove around for a while to calm my nerves. Then I came back and found you here."

Phoebe nodded. Jenna's assistant hugged herself and edged away, toward her own cottage.

"I'm going to call the police!" she cried.

Phoebe nodded and said, "Good." Yet Phoebe had a sense that the old lady wouldn't because she was too frightened. Phoebe looked around for a phone and saw that Jenna's had been torn from the wall. *I guess I'll call them from my cell . . . after I look around for a few minutes.*

Phoebe hunted for the clippings and research material Jenna had promised to dig up for her, but she came up empty-handed. Taking out her cell phone, Phoebe began dialing 911 but realized she was out of range.

Okay, I'll call from the mansion, Phoebe decided. She could see the curtains moving furtively in the neighbor's cottage and didn't want to trouble the frightened old lady again. Phoebe waved at her reassuringly, and the old lady instantly killed her lights.

As Phoebe walked away in the moonlight, she glanced around nervously, worried that whoever had ransacked Jenna's place and scared

her into running off might still be lurking nearby—and watching her. She followed the twisting road that ran parallel to the beach and, out of the corner of her eye, spotted a tiny flicker of light to her left.

Slipping behind a telephone post, Phoebe cast her gaze to the shore, where a man was lighting a pipe. She was about to turn away when she saw the man take something from his pocket and stare at it meaningfully. A pocket watch.

It was James!

Phoebe almost didn't recognize James in his strange outfit. His lean form had been slipped into a bulky, pea green coat, a black knit hat was pulled down over his lustrous black hair, and a heavy scarf was wound about his neck. And he smoked the pipe as if he had done so most of his life—even though Lyssa had sworn James never smoked.

Okay, so what are you up to, buddy? Phoebe wondered. Normally I wouldn't just hop into Nancy Drew mode, but I've had a bad feeling about you for a while, and now with someone busting into Jenna's place . . .

Maybe I should just follow you . . . and find out for myself!



Chapter 6

Phoebe followed James along the shoreline as he visited old, curious-looking spots that—according to brochures she had flipped through in town—the local tourism board had labeled “places of interest” for out-of-towners. The moon was full and unusually bright tonight, enabling Phoebe to keep a close eye on her friend’s fiancé. She watched him pause reverently at each site.

What a strange thing to be doing, Phoebe observed. What on earth is he up to?

James spent almost half an hour on the outskirts of a cove overrun by noisy pelicans, the large birds ignoring him as he knelt in the sand with his hands raised to the starless, onyx sky, his strange chants all but drowned out by their racket. From time to time he would pull out his old pocket watch and stare at its face, then quickly slip it back in his pocket.

Though Phoebe did not see any actual effect come from James’s summons—or whatever the

chanting was—she felt an odd tingling at the base of her scalp and a clamminess that made her skin crawl. A deep sound—so low, she almost couldn't hear it—vibrated and flowed through her. Then suddenly a spiraling whirlpool appeared off in the distant waters. It glowed with the silver of light flashing over steel before it faded.

James walked away.

Interesting, thought Phoebe. Was that supposed to be some kind of supernatural Morse code or something? Inquiring minds wanna know!

An hour later James drew a blade before a pair of towering stone obelisks the brochures called "lover's leap." The craggy rocks rose thirty feet above the lapping surf and they looked to Phoebe like a pair of enormous molars jutting from the sands. Each was flat on the top and had two stabbing columns digging into the sand near the bottom. They were close enough together that you could jump from one column to the other—and high enough that you could leap into the sea from one of them and be carried out forever.

James held out an open palm and slashed his flesh with the blade, flecking a few drops of dark blood against each of the stones. Then he carved symbols in the sand and stood back, waiting. Again, he took out his pocket watch and studied it for much longer than it would have taken him to simply check the time.

Phoebe lay pressed against the earth a hundred yards above him, watching from the only safe vantage she could find without risking exposure. She was getting dry earth and twigs all over her pretty sweater, and one of the local village hounds ambled over and lay down beside her, occasionally leaning over to lick her nose. Suppressing the urge to giggle was nearly driving her crazy.

You wouldn't think playing Nancy Drew would be so tough! thought Phoebe as she watched James and waited for something to happen. *And what's with him and that pocket watch, anyway?*

Sure enough, something did happen. The tall, standing stones *moved*. Their sharp legs tore free of the shifting sand and the rocks stalked around the still and untroubled sorcerer until they stood, one on either side of him, and cut him off from Phoebe's view. Just before that happened, Phoebe saw strange writing begin to appear on their sleek surfaces, arcane runes that wrote themselves with crackling bursts of silver lightning.

The dog whined and backed away, bolting from the scene with a series of low yips and growls.

Okay, so I wasn't imagining things. Our friend James is into some pretty heavy-duty stuff!

Phoebe considered stealing away to tell her sisters about everything she had seen so far, but

her curiosity had the better of her. Besides, all she knew for sure was that James had some connection to magic. She had no idea if he was into anything truly evil or not. The dog came back and started howling. Phoebe turned around to shoo it away and when she looked back, the stone obelisks had returned to their original positions, the arcane writing smoothed from their surface, and James was walking farther down the beach.

Where to now? thought Phoebe as she stealthily chased after him.

To follow James to his next destination, Phoebe had to scramble up a small bank and climb to a high crop of rocks. Below lay a secret cove knotted into the beach with high stone walls reaching around its shallow waters like the protective arms of a giant. The wind carried sounds from the cove right to Phoebe, and this time she heard James clearly as he invoked an otherworldly presence that sounded anything but friendly.

"Dwellers of the deep, progenitors of evil on a million worlds, architects of pain and misery from beyond the stars, I call upon thee . . .," James roared from the echoing stillness below. "Send me your emissary from his watery tomb, from his crypt of suffering and madness, so that he may consecrate my unholy plans and make of this village an unhallowed grave so dark and terrible that all in a thousand realities

will tremble when they hear its name! Come, I beseech you, come now!"

Oh, yeah, definitely not the party-hearty types you want to invite to your wedding—unless you're, like, the new Source of All Evil or something.

A few moments passed, and James again drew out the pocket watch. He was still staring at it when the air around the cove suddenly charged with arcane energies. Phoebe gasped as she saw lightning streak across the shallows, striking James and ricocheting outward to form the outlines of an astounding palace sitting just above the water's surface. It was like looking at a blueprint, all white lines against a deep blue backdrop, the blueprint of an ancient keep or crypt with an many rooms and dungeons as any medieval castle. Vast columns supporting porticos took firmer shape directly in front of James and a strange unearthly form approached him from just beneath its cover.

The thing that shambled toward James had a form that continuously changed. In one instant it possessed the head of a squid and the body of a man, with eyes that blazed with crimson fire. The next, it was all swirling luminous tentacles with a razor-lined maw in its heart, like a bizarre underwater flower. Phoebe's head began to ache as she tried to keep track of its constantly metamorphosing body, and she finally had to look away. But she could hear

much of what James and his guest discussed.

"Why have you summoned me?" asked the creature in a deep, gurgling voice that reminded Phoebe of muck dribbling down a drain.

"To do your bidding," offered James.

"Doubtful," replied the thing. "Belief in acts of true devotion, with no thought of personal gain, are impossibly rare to find in this age."

"Very well. I want something from you and your masters, and I can offer something you desire in return," James confided.

The creature roared impatiently. "I've heard such offers in the past. Know that if your terms do not please me, I will strike you down and tear your soul asunder for an eternity."

James sighed. "And I've faced threats from things like you for almost a hundred long years. Yet I'm still here, in one piece—though the flesh, I'll admit, is borrowed."

He's not James at all, he's the lighthouse keeper, Phoebe realized. *Or—the keeper's spirit's inside him!*

The creature laughed, then intoned dryly, "Make your offer."

Phoebe listened carefully as the keeper offered the creature and its masters the world—literally. It seemed that they had tried to gain a foothold in this dimension many times before and had always been cheated or beaten back. What they planned for this world was nothing less than a paradise for their kind, a world of

darkness and evil that would spell the end of all things for humanity.

Oh, okay, Phoebe thought. Heard that one before, plenty of times. Here I thought this might be something to really worry about!

"Soon I will have the means to turn my dark dreams into a reality that will drown this world with misery," said the keeper. "The Light of the World is about to be mine."

Phoebe scrunched up her forehead at this. The Light of the World? The diamond that Lyssa's parents gave her? It's pretty, yeah, but magical? Is the keeper just trying to con these guys?

The creature hadn't spoken, which made Phoebe curious—and wary. Had she been spotted? She chanced another look down at the crazy scene. No, the keeper and his pal were engaging in a "who blinks first" contest. This time the thing looked like a bodybuilder with bulging forearms that ended in swells resembling the heads of sharks—sharp teeth and all. It towered over the keeper, who dug his hands into his coat and grinned up at the thing.

"You're serious?" asked the creature. "The Light of the World? You do realize what you're saying, don't you? You understand what it truly is?"

"Of course I do," the keeper said contemptuously. "I learned its legend a few years after I died, and I've been chasing it down for the past hundred years."

"We had assumed it lost forever . . . but with

an artifact like that, with the power to amplify the effects of any spell a thousand times over—"

"Any dark vision of the world can become a reality. The jewel's true nature has been magically shielded from detection. The Charmed Ones themselves stood before it and had no idea that it held such power."

Whoa, thought Phoebe. This Keeper guy knows who we are!

The creature shuddered—and changed shape again. Now it looked like a scaly, withered old crone. "Then how did you find it?"

"Being dead has its advantages," the keeper said. "They say dead men tell no tales. That couldn't be further from the truth. Many of the dead who haunt this world cannot move on, and want nothing more than the company of another, someone who will truly listen to all their terrible secrets and misdeeds. And it was in such company that I finally learned the name of the family entrusted with the stone. The mortals have no idea that the diamond is precious to those like us, and incredible power it contains. Those who created it, then rued that decision and attempted to safeguard it from the world—as it can never be destroyed—thought it best to hide it in plain sight. They 'willed' it to caretakers who would protect it out of respect for its monetary value alone."

Okay, thought Phoebe as she repositioned herself in her hiding place, this guy's not just a

jerk—he's a mega-evil demonic jerk who's just marrying Lyssa to get his mitts on that rock! But how do the nixies fit into this? Are they working for him? No—that doesn't make sense. They've been trying to keep the wedding from happening. . . .

"What need do you have of us, of our kind?" asked the creature below.

"I have many enemies," the keeper admitted. "Powerful enemies. They are closer to learning the truth than they realize. I may need help fighting them."

"You speak again of the Charmed Ones?"

"I do. Among others."

Others? wondered Phoebe. *What others?*

"So be it," said the creature. "We will give you the power to make your dreams a reality, and in return, you will give us this world."

The keeper smiled. "Done."

Careful to be quiet, Phoebe rose from her hiding place. She'd heard all she needed to hear, and now all she could think about was finding her sisters and coming up with a plan for fighting James and his pals.

A barrage of green and amber light rose up from below, its reflections dancing upon the high stones and twisting trees that stood as sentinels near the beautiful witch as she cast her gaze around for an escape route. She saw a footpath that led to a thick grove of trees. Beyond the trees glowed the lights of the village. Phoebe sprinted for the trail.

By the time she reached the base of the footpath, the light show behind her had run its course. Phoebe decided it probably meant that James had received whatever dark power the scalies had chosen to grant him, and soon he would be coming for her and her sisters.

Images of Lyssa's disappointed face suddenly appeared in Phoebe's mind. That disappointment would turn to pure devastation when her friend understood that her sweetheart was pure evil.

Been there, done that . . ., thought Phoebe, remembering the shock she'd felt when first learning of Cole's dual nature.

Phoebe wished there were some way to spare Lyssa the pain that was heading her way, but that was nothing more than wishful thinking. The die had been cast.

A branch snapped off to Phoebe's right—and the witch froze. A low, echoing laughter rose from a patch of darkness off to her left and she whirled, her body tensing, her hands instinctively raised as part of a martial-arts defensive stance.

Silence blanketed the night.

Phoebe heard breathing—her own short, anxious breath jabbing at the chilly air—and nothing else.

Had the nixies returned? Or was something worse waiting for her in the darkness?

Come on out, she thought. Blast it, whoever you

are, whatever you are, come out where I can see you!

Pain shot up from the base of Phoebe's neck as her hair was grabbed from behind and she was yanked back. The woods spun in a wide arc as she was flung against the heavy trunk of a tree leaking sap, the impact forcing her jaws to smack together as agony burst from between her shoulder blades and a kaleidoscope of stars spun before her eyes. Sinking to the moss-covered tangle of hard roots at the tree's base, Phoebe looked up sharply as the crush of grass alerted her to her opponent's return.

It was James—his eyes and hands blazing with emerald energies. The laughter that Phoebe had heard moments earlier had tumbled from *his* lips. He regarded her with a look of cruel amusement.

"Get on your feet, witch," he hissed, while the rising wind tugged and smacked at his pea green coat. "If you're lucky, I might go easy on you. But, all things considered—don't count on it."



Chapter 7

Standing outside the club's men's room, Paige crossed her arms over her chest and rolled her eyes as she waited for Simon to finish getting cleaned up. She rapped on the door and called, "Come on, Simon! Things to do, places to be!"

A grunt of frustration came from the other side of the door. "My wife doesn't know about this gig. I need to get all this goop off before you take me home or she'll figure out I was up to something. Then I'll never hear the end of it!"

Paige raised an eyebrow. "Is the missus still into evil?"

"Only if you call asking her mother to live with us evil."

Laughing, Paige checked her watch and did her best to be patient. "So the problem isn't that she'd object to your helping the good guys?"

"Nope. She'd object to my doing it without getting paid. She's my manager, too."

"Ah," said Paige. "I think I'm getting the picture now."

A lock was turned and the door swung inward. Simon emerged, his hair still damp.

Paige looked around to make sure no one was watching, then held out her hand. "Okay, let's go!"

He didn't take her hand. The amber light in his eyes twinkled as he said, "Actually, I used up all their paper towels and I still have some of that muck on me. Do you think you could ask if they have a shower that I could use? Or maybe some regular towels?"

Paige growled in frustration. She thought about just grabbing him, orbing him home, and coming straight back, but he had helped them without any thought of reward, and he had a valid concern about his wife. "Sure, Simon. I'll see what I can do."

Together they went back to the main bar where Simon had performed his act, and there they found Piper in a heated "discussion" with the bar's owner.

"I want it in writing that the Ainsleys will pay for the damage!" the owner shouted.

"Like I *said*," Piper countered, "I can't get anything in writing from them at this hour, but we can go to your office and I'll draw up a rider to the agreement we signed this afternoon detailing all the cleanup that needs to be done. I own P3 in San Francisco, and I'll sign and have the Ainsleys reimburse me."

"Not good enough!" the man hollered. "And how long do I have to wait before you get around to sending a cleanup crew? I can't be closed a single day. I'd lose too much business!"

Piper sighed. "We'll work something out!"

Just then, the owner's two giggling cowgirl daughters came around the bar and grinned at Simon.

"Hi, handsome!" the closest cried.

"Here to do an encore?" asked the other one. "Your act was hot!"

Simon raised an eyebrow. The former incubus said, "Well, I don't burst into flames for just any one. . . ."

"Okay," Paige said as she grabbed Simon's arm. "Time to get you out of here. Piper, can I have the keys to the minivan?"

"Wait up, I'm coming with you," Piper said.

The club owner cried, "What?"

Piper's hand shot out as she pointed to a corner. "Oh, gosh, is that a *rat*?"

The owner and his daughters gasped and quickly looked right at the spot Piper had pointed out. The eldest Halliwell tossed up her hands and froze all three when they weren't looking.

"Let's book," Piper said. "They'll snap out of it after we're gone."

Soon they were out on the street, ducking and dodging the pigeon painter, who was racing around trying to round up several of the birds

for touch-ups. He shook his spray can and the pigeons fled.

"I guess we'll take him back to get him cleaned up," Piper said. "Just make sure he doesn't get any gunk on the seats."

Paige opened the minivan's rear passenger door and gestured for Simon to slide inside, but he didn't seem to notice her. His brow was furrowed, his chin outthrust, his spine ramrod straight. He looked like a hunting animal that had just caught a scent.

"What is it?" asked Paige.

"Did you know you were being followed?" Simon asked softly, forcing a smile onto his handsome face and suddenly carrying himself as casually as possible.

Piper flinched. "I thought someone was following me before."

Simon sniffed the air. "Not just one someone. At least three. Demons, but I can't tell you the clan or power."

"You can sniff them?" asked Piper. "Like a bloodhound?"

Simon shrugged. "Let's just say it takes one to know one."

Piper looked around. Just like before, she didn't see anyone on the street except the pigeon painter and some kids lurking a ways down.

"It's none of them," Simon told her, sensing her suspicion that the children or the old painter were demons in disguise.

"So they're invisible?" asked Paige.

Simon shook his head. "I don't think so. I can't really tell." He grinned. "How about a nice evening stroll?"

Soon they were several blocks away, and the echoing footsteps Piper had heard earlier were trailing behind them.

"They're playing with you," Simon said. "They want you to know that they are near, but they don't want you to see them. I think they're trying to unnerve you."

"Yeah, well, it's not working," Piper said in blustery voice. Then, more softly, she added, "Not much, anyway."

Paige nodded at a narrow alley up ahead. "Maybe we should see if we can persuade them into talking about whatever it is they want."

Simon shrugged. "Somehow, I don't think these are the talky types. But I'm in!"

They veered from the quiet street where the dim windows of shops reflected forms, instead choosing to walk down a cold and dank, narrow passage carved between two towering office buildings. Grasping at the nearest door handle, Paige whipped it open and flung herself inside a tall office building, Piper and Simon at her heels.

Inside, the building's lobby was vast—and vastly creepy. You could run a hundred-yard dash just getting from the security desk to the elevators. Marble pillars rose from floor to ceiling on either side of the lobby. The walls were adorned with

subtle geometric shapes that formed a pleasing aesthetic—but also vaguely reminded Piper of mystical symbols. Soft golden light filtered down from banks of large, oval art deco-style hanging lamps. The security desk was unattended, and the banks of video monitors were disabled. A series of doors stretched along either wall.

Once again, footsteps rang out from nowhere. This time, four men in black strutted out from behind pillars and arrayed themselves before the Charmed Ones and their companion, hands open and at their sides, wicked smiles creasing their handsome faces.

"Surprise," said the closest, his wild, onyx hair whipping as he tossed his head from side-to-side. Strange tattoos snaked and spiraled along the surface of his skin as he spoke. Gills opened and closed on the sides of his neck.

Piper sighed. "No, not really, fishboy. This whole thing smelled like a trap right from the beginning. What do you want?"

"The Light of the World," said the tattooed man. "And you witches are going to get it for us. Otherwise, bad things will happen to your little blond friend."

Paige smacked her forehead. "You guys are nothing but jewel thieves?"

"Kind of makes sense, considering how they can sneak around," observed Simon. "What I don't understand is why they can't just grab it themselves. . . ."

"Stay out of it, incubus," growled the tattooed man. "This doesn't concern you."

Simon grinned. "Maybe not. But I haven't been in a good scrap all year."

The black-haired demon sighed. "The Light of the World must be freely given. Your friend will give it to you, you will give it to us. Simply taking it is not an option."

"Huh!" said Paige. "Sounds like you losers lost a bet or something!"

The demon grinned. "There is so much you don't know. . . ."

Piper shifted her weight from leg to leg, readying herself for battle. She sharply tilted her head from one side to another, working the pain out of her stiff neck. "I'll give you losers one chance: Give us your word that you'll leave Lyssa alone and hightail it out of Dodge, and we'll forget the whole thing. Otherwise—"

The grinning man vanished in a puff of black smoke—and reappeared behind Piper. He grabbed a handful of her hair and slipped a long blade in front of her throat, the gleaming edge sitting centimeters from her flesh.

"Ooh, woo-hoo," Piper said in her best "bored" voice. "Teleporters, huh? Neat trick. You do kids' parties or what?"

"Knife!" Paige hollered, holding out her hand.

Suddenly, the blade being held against the throat of the eldest Halliwell vanished from the

grip of the grinning tattooed man and reappeared in a swirling sheen of light in Paige's out-thrust hand. Piper moved to stamp down on the demon's instep, but he vanished before she could bring her boot to bear.

"Just so you know," said the still-confident grinning man as he reappeared before the witches, "your destruction this evening comes courtesy of the Razvan, soon to be known throughout the netherworlds as the demon clan that all others shall bow down before."

"Great," said Paige as she readied herself for battle. "Now these guys are writing their own press releases!"

"Some diamond thieves who can't even steal a rock on their own are going to become the big bads of the Underworld?" asked Simon. "Boy, that doesn't sound likely!"

"We need the witches," said another of the demons. "*Not* this dancing fool and his big mouth. Destroy him!"

Piper shook her head. The Razvan weren't all that unusual or impressive at first glance. They looked like just another batch of tall, dark, and brooding men with long, black hair and long, black coats. Even their demonic tattoos, which were stitched over every visible inch of their flesh, seemed familiar—until their tattoos began to *move*.

With a snarl, three of the Razvan vanished in puffs of black smoke and instantly reappeared surrounding Simon.

"Look out!" called Piper.

"Whoa!" Simon cried, dodging one demon's fist as it flew over his head and mashed into the face of a different demon behind him. *One down!*

Simon kicked, sweeping the legs out from under the demon who'd thrown the punch along with one of his cronies, who had not yet attacked. By the time they recovered, Paige and Piper were crowding in around the incubus.

"Nice moves!" Paige said.

"Martial arts help keep the muscles limber," Simon said.

The witches surged ahead to attack the remaining demon. Except he teleported away instants before they could reach him. The fallen demons vanished too.

Simon looked around in confusion and wasn't able to move before the grinning leader of the Razvan appeared in a puff of smoke before him and belted him one right in the mouth. As he stumbled from the blow, the four teleporters took turns delivering open-palmed strikes and round-house kicks that laid him out in a few seconds flat.

Piper let out an attention-grabbing whistle. The surprised demons appeared before her in four puffs of smoke, like dogs who were used to being summoned.

That's guys for ya . . ., thought Piper. Her hands were up before her, jabbing the air as she swiftly took aim at the closest demon. An amber

sheen of energy burst against the demon's chest as Piper unleashed her destructive power upon the demon, but he teleported out so quickly that he only suffered a glancing blow and did not explode. The other three were gone before Piper could again take aim. *Where did they go?* she wondered.

Moaning, Simon was just getting to his feet.

Piper whirled to see Paige hold out her hand and yell, "Lamp!" A small desk lamp appeared in Paige's hand just as a demon teleported in front of her. She struck its head with a satisfying smack and brought the demon to his knees, but before she could hit it again, another demon appeared behind her and plucked the lamp from her hand.

Hissing, the demon she had struck turned, whipped out a blade, and drove it at her stomach.

"Hey!" cried Paige as she darted from the strike. "I thought you wanted our help!"

"Maybe if we kill you, your sister will realize that we are not playing games," said the demon as he brought his knife around for another blow.

Paige orbed before the blow could strike her, reappearing at Piper's side. They looked around—but the demons were nowhere in sight. Neither was Simon. Small puffs of black smoke curled in the air where they had stood seconds earlier.

"They grabbed Simon," Piper said. "The creeps."

"Watch the tattoos," Paige advised. "They

start moving even faster just before these guys teleport! It's like a 'tell' in a poker game!"

"What do you know about poker?" asked Piper, surprised.

"Saw it on the sports channel."

The Charmed Ones waited for the demons to reappear and begin their attack anew, but nothing happened.

"I think we should check behind doors one, two, and three," Piper said, gazing at the all-too-quiet lobby and the doors beyond the pillars.

"That could be exactly what these guys want us to do," Paige offered.

"Yeah, probably," Piper said. She strode past a pair of the stone pillars and whipped open the nearest door—Simon, who had been beaten again and was lying on the floor before them in a room filled to the brim with cleaning supplies.

"Paige, orb him someplace safe!" Piper commanded.

"You got it," Paige said, surging forward and touching the dancer's arm. The familiar shower of energies sped over both their forms—then faded. The stunned dancer, and Paige, wearing a confused look, stood in exactly the same spot.

A spatter of nasty, sardonic applause rang out from behind the sisters. They whirled around to see the four demons closing on them.

"You can't orb out of here," the grinning man said, his tattoos moving sluggishly across his

face and hands. "We've sealed the lobby off. No one's going *anywhere* until we have what we want. You will get us what we want, or you and your friend will be destroyed!"

Piper rolled her eyes. "Do you *know* how often we get threats like that? I mean, really, you and every other Tom, Dick, and Belial."

"She's got that right," Paige added. "Too bad Phoebe missed this one, huh?"

Piper nodded. A Power of Three spell would come in handy right about now. She glanced back at the bottles of chemicals lining the walls in the supply closet. "For some reason, the word 'bingo' springs to mind," Piper said as she looked to Simon. He smiled and nodded, completely catching her meaning.

"Enough!" the demon wailed, his jaw tightening as his lips grew wide in a savage grin. "You've seen our great power. Agree to our terms or you will never know peace again!"

"Okay, just checking to make sure I have the rules down . . .," Piper said as she flexed her fingers. "You've set up some kind of magical barrier that takes in this entire floor, the whole lobby. Ceiling, floors, walls. Paige can't orb out of here. In fact, no one can magically *teleport* in or out, right? Not even any of you."

"Um . . .," the demon began uneasily, his eyes narrowing with suspicion, "right, that's it. What's your point? Are you saying you're giving up? You'll get us the Light of the World?"

Piper whirled toward the supply cabinet and raised her hands. "Not exactly." Piper unleashed her destructive power at the rows of chemicals, igniting them all at once.

The Charmed Ones crouched low, Simon throwing his arms over them.

A deafening explosion rocked the walls. A crimson firecloud washed out from the supply room, over the sisters and their protector, and struck at the lobby beyond. The flames seared the walls and incinerated the demons—who could not teleport out of the lobby because of their own barrier spells.

The flames rolled over Simon's back, his powers helping to shield the sisters from them. The lobby was a charred mess, and the demons were now nothing more than white outlines burned into the stone pillars.

Piper shook her head as she eyed the outlines of the vanquished demons. "They weren't too bright, were they? I mean, they could have just teleported to one of the other rooms or the elevator—wherever it was they were hiding from us before, when we were waiting for them to hit us with their big attack."

"The element of surprise," Paige said. "Gets them every time."

They went outside and a welcome chill greeted them.

A smile creased Simon's handsome face as he turned to Paige and said, "You know? I think

those flames burned the rest of that gunk off. You can take me home now."

"Sounds good," added Piper. "I'll head back to the minivan and meet you at the mansion. Phoebe's probably already back there."

"Cool," said Paige. Her brow suddenly knitted in concern.

"What is it?" asked Piper. "Trying to figure out why those guys wanted the Light of the World so bad?"

Paige nodded.

Piper shrugged. "Don't worry about it. I think Simon summed them up: a bunch of demonic jewel thieves looking to pull a big score. They probably planned to sell it or trade it for some big mystical thingee or something."

"Okay, see you back at the mansion," Paige said as she took Simon's arm. "Phoebe should get a kick out of this!"

Checking to make sure no one on the street was watching, Paige orbbed herself and Simon away.

Piper left the darkened alley, thankful that there would be no more mysterious footsteps echoing at her back.



Chapter 8

"Y'know," Phoebe said as she rose to face her challenger, "making deals with demi-gods is just plain *dumb*. They'll double-cross you in the end."

James laughed again. "This world will become a haven for the worst suffering and misery the universe has ever known. Once I know I've brought that about, I really don't care what happens to me."

Frowning, Phoebe sighed heavily. "Well, so long as we've got that covered. . . ."

She leaped at him suddenly, her athletic form shooting up into the air as she levitated high above him and delivered a shattering series of savage high kicks right to the madman's face! His head rocked back with the force of each blow, but his smile never dimmed.

Jerk, Phoebe thought.

He waited until she was through, until she had been flung back by the counterforce of her

own powerful kicks and landed a few feet back. Then James said, "Watch this." Spreading his arms, his entire body turned black—and broke apart into a shattering black cloud of sharply crying blackbirds. Ravens and rooks rushed at Phoebe with raking talons, and she flung up her hands to protect her face as they grasped and tugged at her hair and clothing.

Suddenly they were gone—and Phoebe heard another sound splintering the night along with her own labored breathing: the steady ticking of that blasted pocket watch.

"Birds of the sea," James said, his voice everywhere and nowhere at once. It was carried on the wind, it echoed against the hollow trees. "Predators, parasites . . . what more can I show you? I know . . ."

Phoebe gasped as a soft, slithering sound snaked up from about her ankles. She darted back and looked down to see a writhing mass of monstrous scaly skin slowly surging toward her. Sparks danced between the creatures.

James's voice came again. "Electric eels, anacondas . . . all of the nasty little slitherers from below the waves are anxious to greet you, to squeeze the life from you or shock some sense into you. Whatever it takes to convince you that you cannot fight me."

Mingling with his voice was the steady ticking of the pocket watch, an onerous sound like the beating of a mad and evil heart.

"Yeah, men can be snakes," Phoebe said, wondering if these creatures were really James transformed into another shape—or a bunch of shapes—or just displaced predators that he was using for his own evil ends. "I've known that for a while."

A nasty reptilian hiss shot down from a low-hanging branch just over Phoebe's shoulder. With a start she leaped away from the wide, venomous, snapping jaws of a black snake that was the length of her arm and just as wide. Angling her head upward for a quick glimpse at the tree behind her, she took in hundreds of snakes dangling from the branches. Leaping high and levitating to one of the stronger branches of the tree would not help her escape these creepy things.

Phoebe snatched up a fallen reptile-free branch and hefted it as a storm of snakes streaked at her. She swung it at them, using the branch to catch the closest and whip them away from her, but the snakes encircled her arms and legs, dragging her down and quickly pinning her to the sodden earth. She heard a crackle like lightning and saw a pair of eels slinking toward her face.

She squeezed her eyes shut—but nothing happened. And when she opened them again, the snakes holding her down had vanished, replaced by soft strands of soggy vine that shredded easily as she bounded to a crouching position.

James was playing with her. And the ticking of his pocket watch wouldn't stop.

"I have another power," Phoebe warned. "I can tell the future. Want to know what I see in store for you?"

The darkness before her grew darker still, and suddenly a great shadow detached itself from the night and eased her way, the wings of its pea green coat whipping dramatically. Phoebe heard the slight *whoosh* of flames and saw a reddish glow outline James's sneering features as he lit his pipe. "Do tell."

Phoebe raised her hands and began to conjure.

"Oh, a spell!" James cried between puffs on his pipe. "The promise of revealing my future was just a bluff to make me reveal myself, and now you're going to cast a *spell* on me!" He opened his arms wide, exposing his chest. "Do it, have your fun. And when it's over, I'll have mine. Seems only fair, don't you think?"

Phoebe shuddered with fury. "Y'know, you don't talk much like a hundred-year-old ghost."

Tossing his head back, James laughed again. "It's not like I've been stuck with my head in a crypt all this time. I know plenty about this world—and I've got good old James to thank for updates to the vernacular."

"The ver . . . *who*? And why are you acting like James is a real person and not just an identity you took on to get close to Lyssa? Or was there a real James, and you're just possessing his body!"

James laughed. "I thought you had a spell to cast, witch. Get on with it—I promise, you won't be given a chance like this again."

Her gaze narrowing, Phoebe began to recite one of the spells she and her sisters held in reserve after all their recent demon vanquishing. The very ingredient she would need to make this magic work was in arm's reach. She chanted:

*I know you now,
O thing of terror.
So separate now,
From your wearer!*

Phoebe struck out her hand, her fingers closing over a low-lying sprig of juniper, but before she could hurl it, a living, twisting vine burst from the ground and bound her hand in place!

"Hmmm," said James. "'Thing of terror,' huh? I like that!"

Phoebe never even saw the backhanded blow that whipped her head back and knocked her unconscious.

She woke to an even greater chill and the soft, steady dripping of water from a great height. Bands of ice had closed around her wrists and her vision was blurred, strands of her wet hair hanging before her eyes. Her arms and shoulders ached, along with her jaw, where she had

been struck. No, her jaw didn't just ache, it throbbed.

James stood before her, his appraising gaze sweeping over her form until it reached her eyes—then stopped. "You're awake. Good. Look around, get oriented. You're going to be here for a while."

Phoebe shook her head, easing a few strands of tousled hair away from her eyes. She was in a darkened cave. It was practically pitch black. The only light that drifted in from the cavern's mouth came from the moon streaking across the gently breaking sparkling waves outside.

She tried to move, but she felt something binding her and could hear the rattling of chains. She was bound up against a cold damp wall.

Perfect.

"I'm guessing the chains are magically enhanced," Phoebe observed.

"Nothing but the best," said James.

Phoebe gave the chains a few good yanks, just for the heck of it. *You never know—the chains could be good, but the moorings rotten.*

No such luck.

The chain rattling only widened James's smile.

"You know, I keep thinking of you as James, but that's not who you are," Phoebe observed.

Her captor nodded. "True."

When Phoebe first saw James committing strange, arcane acts on the beach, she had thought that perhaps he was an evil sorcerer or a warlock or a bad witch. When she had overheard him tell the weird fishy guy that he was the lighthouse keeper, Phoebe had then believed that the lighthouse keeper had somehow managed to create a new body for himself and then romanced Lyssa in the guise of the good-natured James. Of course, *that* turned out to be totally wrong. James was possessed.

Phoebe was all too aware of the reason she hadn't immediately thought of James as another Innocent. From the moment she saw his photo, she had been reminded just a little of Cole, and she had feared that her friend was marrying a man who would ultimately hurt her and betray her. But James was another victim here, and she now swore that she would do everything in her power to rescue him from the evil spirit possessing his body.

"As to what you should call me," said the spirit from within his borrowed flesh, "I prefer the keeper."

"Okay, now that we've got that straight . . .," muttered Phoebe.

"Yes?"

"Well, not that I want you to change your mind about leaving me alive or anything, just, uh—"

The corners of the keeper's mouth quirked

upward to form a cruel smile. "Why *have* I let you live?"

Phoebe shrugged as best she could. "Right. You bad guys usually have your reasons."

Surging at the chained witch, the keeper snarled and cupped Phoebe's face in his hot, meaty hand. "Your magic will help provide an even greater connection between myself and those beneath the waves, the dwellers in the deep with whom I have struck countless bargains . . . and will no doubt strike countless more."

Phoebe winked. "Right, but . . . who's counting, huh?"

With a cry of frustration at Phoebe's refusal to show him the fear and respect he so clearly craved, the keeper slammed Phoebe's head against the cold, dank wall and stormed out of the cave.

When the roaring in her ears, the exploding stars before her eyes, and the throbbing pain at the back of her skull finally eased, Phoebe sank down to as comfortable a position as she was likely to find, the chains attached to her steel wrist cuffs rattling as she went.

"So he wants to drain my magic," cried Phoebe. "Perfect!"

"Tell me about it," someone murmured from the darkness a few feet away.

Phoebe tensed. "Who's there?"

No one answered.

Phoebe did her best not to squirm. The

keeper could have minions. Bad guys *loved* surrounding themselves with minions. Minions were like early warning systems for when things were getting too dangerous for big, bad, nasty types like the keeper. The moment enough minions burst into flames, it was time for the big bad to hightail it out of there.

It was possible that if all the darkness held was a stray minion or two, then she really had nothing to worry about. Minions were usually just left behind to guard prisoners and they generally weren't bright enough to come up with any clever ideas of their own, like . . .

Like magically torturing a chained-up, helpless victim.

Phoebe peered deeply into the darkness to her left, where the voice had originated. "Um . . . hello? Listen, whoever you are, you'd better not mess with me. In fact, you'd better *back off*, buddy!"

Someone snickered. Phoebe *hated* snickering. . . . It was such a miniony thing to do.

Suddenly, a faint glow mushroomed in the center of the cavern's dank echoing darkness. It quickly transformed from the soft brilliance of a handful of fireflies to the raging flare of near blinding brightness against which Phoebe had to squeeze her eyes shut. The light's harshness lessened and Phoebe blinked several times, the latest set of spots before her vision quickly fading to reveal a low, steadily pulsing group of forms

that moved about before her with their own unique inner light.

"Oh, wow," Phoebe murmured. "You're the nixies!"

The nixies were breathtakingly beautiful—and remarkably unearthly. They reminded Phoebe of *living* ice sculptures. She could see tiny orange and emerald fish swimming in pockets of water within their lithe, elegant bodies. The thin, sleek, overlong arms and legs of the nixies bobbed and wavered as if they were underwater, and their incredibly long, talonlike fingers undulated while their ovoid heads bobbed. At least a half-dozen of the strange creatures stood less than ten feet from her, each one ebbing and flowing mysteriously.

Phoebe gulped. Just because the nixies were stunning to look at did not mean they were on the side of good. Evil could be pretty—or even devastatingly handsome.

"The warning stands," Phoebe said firmly, though she knew there was very little she could do at the moment to back up her threat. Yet something Cole had once told her rose in her memories: *Evil respects strength.*

"So beautiful," said the closest of the nixies. His voice was low, deep and flowing, calling to mind the gentle fall of water over rocks in a twisting stream. Phoebe felt her heart skip a beat as the cool night air suddenly seemed to sizzle with anticipation. She couldn't *wait* for him to speak again.

Why am I feeling this way? she wondered.

"I've heard others call you by name. You are Phoebe, correct?" the nixie called. This time, his voice seemed to travel right through her, its power rebounding within her blood, brushing her soul. She shivered.

"Yeah . . . stop that," she said, smiling and not really sure she meant it. Her skin was covered in goose bumps. He was—literally—enchanted. Every bit of him was made of magic.

Another of the nixies cleared his "throat"—and, just like that, the magic went away.

"This is what you get for trying to protect your charges," one of the nixies moaned in a dark, dreary, Eeyore-like drawl.

"Shut up, Chet," the tallest of the nixies commanded.

"Such with the drama," another voice cut in, this one high and reedy, like the tapping fingers of light rain on a window. "Can't he ever once look at the bright side?"

"Is there a bright side?" Chet solemnly chimed in. "We've been captured. We'll probably be tortured. And our magical essences will be leeches from us. What exactly should we be celebrating? Getting to hang out together? Haven't we had plenty of that over the last, I don't know . . . three thousand *years*?"

Ignoring the complainer, the tall nixie bowed before Phoebe and said, "That's Chet. I'm Harry, this is Steve."

"Hey, Phoebe, nice to get formally introduced," Steve said with a friendly wave. "Wish the accommodations were a little better."

"Not so bad for you, maybe," Phoebe said. "You can come and go whenever you want."

"Phoebe," the tall nixie said, his arms outstretched. "Very few are truly free. We can no more leave this place without the keeper's grace than you can."

"So you're telling me that you're a prisoner, too?" Frowning, Phoebe recalled all the heartache these mischief-makers had caused Lyssa. "Oh, and let me guess. The next thing you're going to tell me is that the keeper *made* you do all that nasty stuff to help ruin my friend Lyssa's wedding!"

Harry shook his head. "Our only desire is to *stop* the keeper. We never wanted to ruin your friend's happiness. We simply didn't see another way."

Phoebe's brow furrowed. "Explain."

"The keeper wishes the wedding to take place," said Harry. "And it is the keeper, not James, whom Lyssa will be marrying if the ceremony takes place!"

Phoebe nodded slowly. "Okay, I've got to admit, you have a point there."

"Humans," muttered Chet suddenly. "Humans like the Keeper. It's always humans that mess things up. You don't see any whales causing problems, worshiping the dark old ones in their

temples in the watery deeps in return for a few extra tons of shrimp, do you? *No!*"

"Whoa, whoa, wait!" Phoebe cried. "Whales? Why are we talking about whales? Slow down, focus!"

"Would it really be so bad to bust him one in the chops?" Steve asked brightly, nodding to their negative-minded companion.

Phoebe shook her head. "Okay, let's get the facts straight here. So you guys *are* nixies."

"That's right!" Harry said ebulliently.

"You're not evil, not up to mischief," Phoebe added.

Steve piped in, "Yup!"

Phoebe needed time to consider that, so she asked about something else that had been bugging her. "Question for you: How do you end up with a name like 'nixies,' anyway?"

"Oh, that's easy," Steve told her. "Pixies was taken."

Phoebe sighed. Otherworldly types were often kind of crazy and scattered when compared with your average . . . well, your *average* Harry, Steve, and Chet. She wondered where they had gotten those names, but was afraid to ask.

She asked, anyway.

"I've gotta say, you guys aren't at all like what I was expecting," Phoebe said brightly. "The way you talk, I mean. You look so ancient and weird . . . pretty—beautiful, really—like ice

sculptures with arms and legs and those big eggy things for heads and the-visitor-from-another-planet oval eyes and stuff. But you have these everyday names and it's so easy to just chitchat."

Harry laughed quietly. "We had our own language, once, and some of us still speak it. Most of us *used* to talk in all that old English whatnot, lots of thees and thous and stuff . . . that was before we got TiVo."

Okay, Phoebe decided. These guys are just too goofy to be evil. And if they're good, maybe I can sweet-talk them into helping me get out of this place.

"Another question: I know what's keeping *me* in here." Phoebe rattled her chains. "Lots of solid steel and some pretty strong magic, to boot. But you guys look like you could just get up and walk out of here anytime you like. Is that right?"

"That's the thing about looks, sometimes," Harry the nixie said as he took a step forward and put out his hand. "They can be deceiving."

A thunderous howl of pain shook the earth as a wall of flames suddenly burst into existence directly before the tall nixie. He drew his hand back sharply and cradled it close to his body.

It was smoking. The flames had seared it into *steam*.

"Ouch!" Phoebe said sympathetically. And as she watched, his hand slowly gained its liquid outline once more. He flexed the fingers and raised them once more. Phoebe hollered, "No, wait!"

But the nixie thrust his hand forward again, and this time his agony nearly swept him from his feet.

"We have to keep testing the cage," he said, withdrawing and keeping his hand out of view. "There may be a flaw, a weakness we can exploit. My instincts tell me that there is a flaw in this very spot."

Phoebe's eyebrows shot up in alarm. "Yeah, but in the meantime . . . ouch!"

He nodded grimly. "Yes . . . ouch. And beyond this prison of fire lie two more invisible but deadly barriers."

Phoebe didn't want to know what those other dangers might be. This prison was frighteningly well constructed—or so it seemed.

"So what can you tell me about this keeper character?" asked Phoebe.

"How much do you already know?" asked Harry.

Phoebe briefly recounted what she had been able to piece together, particularly about the Light of the World.

"Yes, the keeper has been after the Light of the World for a very long time," Harry explained. "And he's not the only one, of course. He's just

the first to have faced the task with literally all the time in the world to do so."

"I say he just got lucky," rumbled Chet.

Phoebe shook her head. "Why doesn't he just *take* the rock, if he wants it that bad?"

"He can't," Harry replied. "The Light of the World is bound by powerful spells. If the keeper just stole it, he would never be able to use its great power. The Light of the World *must* be given freely, like a hand in marriage."

Phoebe understood. "The second he's married to Lyssa, all that belongs to her will be his—including the Light of the World."

"That's right." Harry's voice became grave. "And now he'll have the diamond on the day when he will be strongest: the hundred-year anniversary of his beloved's shipwreck."

"But . . . come on," said Phoebe, still wondering deep down if James was *completely* innocent or not. "There's no way it's just a coincidence that James and Lyssa are getting married on exactly that day."

"No. The keeper found out quite some time ago that Lyssa's family had the Light of the World. He's been planning this for years."

Phoebe bit her lip. "So when did he possess James?"

"The day you arrived. But his influence began long ago. Just after James and Lyssa met and fell in love, the keeper began visiting James in his dreams, subtly steering him

toward a fascination with the lighthouse of Serenity Cove and the keeper's own legend. The keeper even made it seem poetic in a way for James to marry his ladylove on the same day the keeper lost his wife, and to have the ceremony right there, at the lighthouse, where the tragedy unfolded. James believed the wedding would overturn a century of old superstitions and replace a thing of darkness and horror with one of light and love."

"Wow," Phoebe said at last. "It sounds like James was—is—a real romantic after all!"

"Yes," Harry agreed. "He must be saved, and the keeper must be stopped. And I think I know a way to make that happen . . . if you're willing to help."

"Are you kidding?" asked Phoebe, taken once again by the almost hypnotic and altogether fetching sound of the nixie's enchanting voice. "Where do we start?"

The keeper stared at the shimmering, moonlit waters outside the cave where he'd placed his prisoners. He dimly remembered a time when he found such sights beautiful and mesmerizing, when he was truly a living, breathing man and not just a ghost in a shell.

He took out his pocket watch and considered the busy night that still lay ahead of him. The nixies had not only ruined the women's gowns, they had destroyed all the food for the

big day. He had very little time to make things right.

"I made a vow to you, my beloved," the keeper said as he thought of his lost Trudy, her laugh, her smile, and the warm, wet touch of her lips. "I swore that I would make this world pay for what they did to us. Soon, I will keep that promise—and this world will know the misery we have suffered. Trudy, please! Say something!"

He waited, staring at the sea, praying for a reply. Trembling, he hollered, "Trudy, why won't you *answer* me? Darling, why won't you come to me so that our vengeance can be complete?"

Only the soft lapping of the waves rose to his ears.

The keeper hung his head. He had tried to make contact with his sweetheart for nearly a century. They were both dead and he encountered and spoke with the dead *all the time*, yet no matter what he tried, he could not raise her spirit.

"I would give anything to see your face again," the keeper said quietly. "But it seems I must earn that privilege." He drew a sharp breath. "Tomorrow, my love. Come to me tomorrow, when at last I have made things right."

Steeling himself, the keeper raised his hands, the emerald glow engulfing them once more. Streaks of green lightning ripped from his upthrust hands and split the night sky, but only

for an instant. A warning peel of thunder rolled in from above the distant waves, and a shape broke from the water.

The keeper waited, and soon a gorgeous female sea nymph burst from the waters and climbed upon the shore. She strode to him haughtily.

"My name is—" she began.

He cut her off with a sharp gesture. "I don't care. Do you understand what must be done? Are you ready?"

"See for yourself," she replied. "You know what I require."

He nodded. "A kiss to light your way."

The keeper took her in his arms—and pressed his cold lips to hers. She returned the kiss with an unexpected passion and a greenish amber glow washed over her, changing her. Hair sprouted on her bald, scaly head, her features sharpened, her otherworldly eyes became wide and filled with tenderness. Clothing appeared on her body as her scales transformed into pale flesh.

When the keeper pushed her away, the back of his hand swiping across his mouth, he saw that she looked *exactly* like Phoebe Halliwell.

"Let us begin," said the keeper as he walked from the shore with the imposter.

His laughter echoed above the night winds.

Piper and Paige were both pacing in the mansion's well-lit entry hall. They had been at the

mansion for half an hour now and Phoebe still hadn't returned.

"I'm trying her cell again," Paige said, digging her phone out from her purse.

"You'll just get her voice mail again," Piper told her.

Paige was already dialing. "I have to do something." She waited a few seconds, frowned, and hung up. "Voice mail."

"See?"

"We're probably worrying for nothing," Piper said. She was still pacing. Now she was wringing her hands anxiously. She just had a sense that something was wrong.

Paige raised an eyebrow. "Wait a minute. Wasn't Phoebe going over to the woman's place? The writer?"

"Yeah!" said Piper. "But I can't remember her name. . . ."

"I've got an idea. Leo!"

Their resident Whitelighter appeared in a shower of sparkling energy. He held a sleeping Wyatt in his arms.

"What is it?" he asked, his brow furrowed in worry. "Is something wrong?"

"Actually," said Paige, "I was wondering if you could look something up on the Internet for us."

Leo orbed home to their computer, found the name, phone number, and address of the author, then orbed back with it. "Anything else?"

Piper held out her arms. She took Wyatt,

cradling him gently for a moment, then gave him back. "No, we're good. I'll let you know if there's any problem with Phoebe."

"Okay, good," he said. He kissed Piper gently and orbed away.

Piper grabbed the phone and dialed the author's number. The line was answered instantly by a gruff-sounding man.

"Sherriff Buck Elias here," he said. "Who am I speaking with?"

"Um . . . I'm trying to reach Jenna Marsten?" Piper said hesitantly.

"I'm afraid there's been some trouble. Are you a relative of Ms. Marsten?"

Piper gripped the phone so hard, her knuckles turned white. "No. Was anyone hurt?"

"Not so far as we can tell. Could just be vandals. What was your name again?"

Piper disconnected the line and grabbed a jacket. "Come on!" she called to Paige. "We need to get out there and see what's happening."

Paige orbed them to the outskirts of the honeymoon cottages. Red and blue lights from police cars flashed between the heavy trees up ahead. An old lady in a jogging outfit came down the road toward the sisters. She shook her head as she saw the Halliwells.

"Don't go up there," the old lady warned. "Not unless you want to spend the night answering questions!"

"Do you know what happened?" asked Piper.

"My neighbor, Jenna Marsten, came running out of her place and drove away. Someone had gone through and broken all her things!"

"You didn't happen to see a young woman named Phoebe, did you?" Paige asked. She described her sister.

"She was here earlier. I told her what I knew, then she left. I don't know who phoned the police. One of the honeymoon couples, I suppose . . ."

"But Phoebe was okay the last time you saw her?" asked Piper.

"Right as rain," the old lady said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm getting out of here."

Piper sighed as she watched the old lady hurry off into the night. "She may have a point. It doesn't sound like the police can help us find Phoebe."

"I could scry for her if I had a crystal and a map of this place," Paige lamented.

"In the minivan. I bought a map on the way here and packed a couple of crystals just in case," Piper revealed.

Paige was impressed. "You really do think of everything!"

They orbled to the minivan to retrieve the map and a crystal. Paige laid the map out on the minivan's hood and swung the crystal on its chain over the map as she concentrated on Phoebe. Suddenly, the crystal was yanked

toward a particular spot on the map where it came to rest with a dull thud. Paige and Piper looked down.

"The beach," Piper said.

Paige looked around to make sure no one was watching them, then orbbed herself and Piper to the spot the crystal had pointed out.

There, standing near the edge of the waters, was a water-soaked Phoebe.

"Oh hey, girls," said Phoebe. "Nice night for a dip!"

"We were worried about you," Piper said with a frustrated growl.

"You weren't answering your cell phone," added Paige.

Phoebe shrugged. "Like I said, I was out swimming. I couldn't answer the phone while I was in the water, now could I?"

Paige looked to the rolling waves. "It must have been freezing. Are you okay?"

With a broad grin, Phoebe said, "Actually? I've never been better."

"What about Jenna Marsten?" asked Piper. "Her place was ransacked."

"Her!" Phoebe spat. "What a kook. I don't think she's going to be able to help us at all. In fact, I'm pretty sure she made up most of those stories about the lighthouse keeper just to sell more books. And I think she tore her place up herself just to get attention. Crazy lady."

"That's too bad," Paige said softly.

Piper looked to the water once again. "Still, why the midnight swim?"

Phoebe raised an eyebrow. "Okay, you got me. I thought I saw one of those nixie thingees in the water and I jumped in, trying to follow it. I thought there might have been someplace down below where they made their home, where we could trap them until the wedding was over."

"Is there?" asked Paige.

"Not that I could see. And I don't think it was a nixie after all, just a trick of the moonlight. I was kind of embarrassed."

"Well, let's get you back to the mansion," suggested Piper. "We can get you dried off and then we can check out what happened to the food for tomorrow."

"Actually," said Phoebe, pulling away from her sister's outstretched hand, "the water really woke me up. If it's cool with you guys, I'm going to stay out awhile. Maybe I'll get an idea about how to stop the water creatures."

Paige frowned. "Okay, but turn your cell phone on."

"You got it," promised Phoebe.

Paige took Piper's hand and together they orbbed away, leaving the sea nymph pretending to be Phoebe to breathe a sigh of relief. She shook her hair, and her entire form dried instantly. Salt water would do nothing to disrupt her disguise. Other forms of liquid, however, would be a problem, so she would have to be careful.

Angry cries sounded nearby, and she turned to the nearby cave where the real Phoebe was being held prisoner. It was a good thing that she, the double, had still been nearby, or her sisters may have discovered the truth.

In the far distance she saw something bobbing on the water. It looked like a small boat. She shook her head.

"This isn't the best night for a pleasure cruise, whoever you are," she whispered. Then, with a laugh, she turned and walked down the shore.

Aboard the small boat, painter Roy Whittaker slammed his fist against the control panel. His boat's instruments were giving readings that made no sense at all. The compass spun randomly between north and south, east and west, and his sonar revealed huge masses below and approaching fast, which made no sense considering how close he was to shore. He might have understood the odd readings if he'd been caught in a freak electrical storm that could effect his instruments, but the weather was clear and he could see the twinkling lights of Serenity Cove up ahead.

He had been out searching for a new spot for his underwater paintings when exhaustion had set in. He set anchor, lay down to rest his eyes, and woke to find the entire evening gone. His attempts to get home had somehow taken him here.

Grasping the microphone for his radio, he opened his mouth to send a distress call, then closed it again. The radio was dead. As he watched, all the instruments went silent and dim before his eyes.

Outside, something howled.

He would have to set anchor here, or hope he might drift close enough to shore without encountering the dangerous breakers that had destroyed many a ship before his. Yes, laying anchor now would be the right thing to do.

Climbing onto the deck, Whittaker saw the waves frothing and felt a sudden violent rocking as something bumped his ship from below. He had his hands on the manual anchor controls and hesitated, no longer certain he wanted to stay in this spot.

The boat rocked again, this time so severely that he tumbled from his feet and caught the guardrail an instant before being spilled into the sea. He had a strange vision of a giant holding a can of food and shaking it to get a few remains out. Weird!

Something struck the boat again and the howling sliced through him. The sound wasn't some random wind. There was no wind at all.

What was making that sound?

Then, in the bright moonlight, he saw it. A shape five times larger than his boat, writhing, as if it was covered in a mass of scaly tentacles.

It burst from the water and blotted out the moon.

The painter had time to consider what an amazing image this would have been to paint. And time enough to scream.

Then the impossible, gigantic thing descended on him.



Chapter 9

Piper yawned and stretched as she strode down the long corridor to Phoebe's room. Squinting, she raised her hand to shield her eyes from the golden glare of early morning sunlight streaking in from the hall's high windows. The sunny warmth felt wonderful and filled Piper with hope that today would be the truly special day Lyssa deserved—especially weather-wise. After all, what bride didn't worry that some sudden storm would sweep in and ruin her perfect day? And in this place, bad weather and doomed weddings were legendary.

She rapped lightly on Phoebe's door, waited a few seconds, and began to pound away. "All right, sleepyhead! Big day, rise and shine, up and at 'em!"

Piper waited, expecting to hear the customary "Go away!" that Phoebe had been handing her since they were kids. But only silence greeted her.

"Phoebe?" called Piper. "Come on, now! Big day, today! We get to put on funky-looking dresses and try to figure out a shade of lip gloss that'll work with 'em! Won't that be fun?"

Not even a peep came from the other side of the door.

Piper felt a chill race up her spine as worry entered her thoughts. She was about to reach for the door when she smelled something odd behind her. Was it a new kind of perfume? Piper didn't care for the scent. It was like eau de fish and chips. She turned to face her smiling sister—and nearly gagged at the sight of what was in her hands.

"Yum—breakfast crabcakes!" Phoebe said between mouthfuls. "Want some? The kitchen's full of them!"

Piper stared at her in confusion. "But—I thought all the food for the wedding was destroyed!"

Phoebe shrugged. "Dunno. I guess *someone* really wants this wedding to happen, 'cause there's plenty of grub now. Like clam chowder and swordfish steaks and—"

"It's all seafood?" asked Piper.

Phoebe nodded. "Best that could be done on short notice, I suppose."

"Well, okay then, good," Piper said absently as she followed Phoebe into her room. "I just wish something could be done about those dresses. They were—"

Piper stopped dead as she saw the elegant aqua maid-of-honor gown laid out on the bed and the wooden rack with a stunning, white bride's dress hanging next to a handful of other aqua bridesmaid gowns.

"Phoebe, you didn't use magic for personal gain, did you?" Piper asked, ringing her hands.

"Not me!" Phoebe assured her. "I didn't have anything to do with this. It was all—"

A light tapping at the door cut her off. Piper whirled and saw James watching them from the doorway. His grin couldn't have been wider.

"Ladies," James said.

"You did this?" Piper asked. "You fixed the gowns, the catering—"

"I've been keeping an eye on the floral arrangements—and the deejay, too. You wouldn't believe some of the song choices that wannabe-Ricky Martin had lined up for us," James revealed. "But it's fine. It's all fine now. I took care of everything."

Piper's head was reeling at this. "How?"

James wiggled his fingers in midair. "Magic, of course!" Then he laughed. "Just kidding."

Piper nodded slowly, not amused in the slightest.

"I know I haven't been around much, but I've been keeping busy," James said as he stepped inside and strode to the window, which housed a luscious view of the lighthouse. "Nothing's going to go wrong today, not if I can help it."

"Okay, *great*," Piper said, her forehead wrinkling. "But you still didn't explain how you did all this."

James shrugged self-depreciatingly. "It really isn't all that big a deal. I have friends at Caltech in the experimental research department, lots of hush-hush government contracts and that kind of thing. They had solvents to remove the second layer of dyes that turned the dresses a funny color. Getting the dresses down there and back meant driving all night, but it was worth it. And when I was waiting around, I handled the catering and all the other issues by phone and e-mail. Lyssa's dad is going to get one heck of a bill for all this, but I don't think he'll mind."

"Huh," Piper said, inwardly reflecting that she hadn't heard food supply trucks rolling up in the night. But then again, before she'd had Wyatt, she had been an even heavier sleeper than Phoebe.

Winking, James pulled out his pocket watch, studied its face, then angled back for the door. "I've got to check on my best man. It wouldn't do for *him* to be late. See you both later!"

Phoebe sighed like a lovelorn teenager while she watched James exit the room. "Isn't he *perfect*? I could gobble him up like a nice piece of sushi."

"I suppose if you go for the tall, dark, handsome, and remarkably romantic type, sure," Piper said with a wry smile. "But remember:

That's Lyssa's guy, you're the maid of honor, and keep your hands to yourself!"

"I can look, can't I?"

"No."

Phoebe set down her fishy treat and stretched. Again, the smell of that strange perfume filled the air.

"And take a shower while you're at it," Piper said sternly. "I love you, honey, but as your older sister, I gotta tell ya—you reek! I think it's all that seafood you ate."

Phoebe tensed at the mention of a shower—then smiled and laughed broadly, promising she would do just that.

The morning sped by as the sisters busied themselves with last-minute preparations for the wedding. Piper could still smell that weird fishy perfume on Phoebe, but the smell was masked by a ton of perfume. *Whatever*, she finally decided. *The whole wedding is going to smell like the Monterey Fish Market, anyway, with the food they'll be serving.*

As soon as they had had their dress fittings—where the gowns looked perfect—Piper hauled Phoebe and Paige off to a quiet corner of the downstairs study.

"Listen, we need a plan for dealing with the nixies," Piper said pensively. "You *know* they're not going to quit now, especially after our last plan to trap them blew up in our faces."

"I wouldn't worry about those guys," Phoebe

said, her gaze fixed on a nearby fishtank filled with beautifully colored exotic fish. Her eyes glazed over and she licked her lips hungrily. When she spoke again, she sounded like she was in a near-hypnotic trance. "I'm betting they're pretty tied up right now."

"What do you mean?" asked Paige.

Piper had to snap her fingers in front of Phoebe's face to make her little sister snap out of it. "Yeah, what *do* you mean? Tied up how?"

"I—uh—I worked a protection spell," Phoebe told them. "Yeah, pretty heavy-duty stuff. Took most of the night. Nope, those guys won't be coming around to bother us again, I'll tell you that much!"

"All on your own?" Paige asked. "Why didn't you wake us?"

"Yeah, and where'd you find the spell?" asked Piper.

"Um . . .," Phoebe meandered. "I had it lying around?"

"Okay," Paige said, conking her own forehead with her open palm. "You had some left-over incantations ready? And you just adapted one of them?"

"Right," Phoebe said, relief flooding into her words. "That's exactly what I did!"

Piper frowned. "If you really think that'll do it, fine. But my vote is that we have a backup plan. I'm going to work on one, even if neither of you are interested."

The problem, of course, was where to find the time to develop a plan. Piper would be kept busy for hours getting Lyssa and the others to the beauty salon to get their hair done—even though that was Phoebe's job as maid of honor. Phoebe had sworn up and down that her hair was fine the way it was, which Piper couldn't really argue with. There wasn't a lock out of place, and she had other things to do.

First she won't shower. Now she's acting like a baby about getting her hair wet, noticed Piper. *Weird!* But not weird enough to spend a lot of time worrying over. Phoebe often got into strange moods.

Then the crisis started to hit. The age-old tradition of something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue hit a color-blind snare when Piper got the girls back to the mansion and Phoebe admitted she couldn't remember where she had put the blue garter they had purchased for Lyssa at the lingerie shop. After a long, frantic search, Phoebe came back with a new garter she and Paige had made from a stretch of fishnet dangling from one of the marine-themed decorations in the foyer, which they hoped no one would miss. That led Phoebe to start going on and on about the decorations at the wedding, how everything should be a marine-theme, and maybe some nice seaweed hangings would brighten things up. . . .

Piper checked her sister's forehead to make

sure her sister didn't have a fever, but Phoebe's skin was ice cold to the touch.

The really *big* crisis came from the most unexpected source of all: Lyssa herself!

The sisters were in Lyssa's bedroom, helping her with her veil, when a strange, sad look filled the bride's eyes.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" Piper asked as she helped to fasten the sparkling Light of the World around Lyssa's neck.

Lyssa rose and gazed at herself in the full-length mirror sitting in the corner. "Piper, Phoebe . . . you have to understand, my parents are the ones who wanted this big, fancy wedding, and I just wanted to make them happy. But they're *not* happy. So many things have gone wrong . . ."

Phoebe tensed. "But everything's fixed. James took care of it all."

"Right," added Paige thoughtfully.

"I don't know," Lyssa said. "I'm thinking about canceling and rescheduling the wedding. That way, we can replan, we'll have plenty of time to—"

Phoebe's hands shot out and clamped tightly on Lyssa's shoulders. Her friend cried out, but the expression of pain and surprise did nothing to loosen Phoebe's vicelike grip. "Now you listen to me. There's a time and a place for everything, and this is the time and the place for this wedding."

Paige started toward her sister. "Phoebe!"

"Let me finish!" Phoebe hissed. Her gaze never left that of her worried friend. "James may have told you that he'd be just as happy getting hitched with the justice of the peace, but that's *not* what he told me."

"You've been speaking with James?" Lyssa asked, as if in a daze. "But I thought you two weren't getting along. . . ."

"Yeah, that makes two of us," Piper said with sudden suspicion.

Phoebe let go of Lyssa and backed away. "I'm sorry. It's just that I can tell you that being married today, in front of that lighthouse, means a lot to James."

Lyssa ran her hands over the Light of the World. "He . . . he said that because this is the hundred-year anniversary of when that lighthouse keeper lost his fiancée and people in this village started believing there was evil here, that we had a chance to turn that all around. At the same time that we'd be starting our life together, we'd be making things new again for all these people."

"*Exactly*," Phoebe said with a sigh of relief. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime event. I promise, nothing else could even come close. Have the wedding today."

Piper had heard enough. She grabbed her sister by the arm and steered her toward the door. She whispered harshly, "Phoebe, don't be

selfish! This is about what's best for Lyssa. It has nothing to do with what happened between you and Cole."

"Cole?" Phoebe asked.

"Fine, play innocent. But I have a pretty good idea that you're worried there isn't any such thing as true love after what happened to you, and you're bound and determined to see this wedding happen just to prove there really is. And that's nuts!"

"That's not it," Phoebe said softly. "Believe me, that's not it at all. . . ."

A hand suddenly rested on Piper's shoulder. It was Lyssa.

The bride's smile was beaming. "Hey, you two. Aren't you supposed to be getting me to the church on time?"

"Then you're sure you want to do this?" Piper asked.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," Lyssa assured her. "I'm getting married today!"

All three sisters cheered.

Twenty minutes later, the lovely nymph posing as Phoebe stood alone near a flickering fireplace in the lobby, waiting for her "sisters" to appear with the keeper's bride. Knowing that she was so close to the Light of the World had begun to make her edgy, and so she had volunteered to bring the car around and wait downstairs for the

others. Now she watched the crackling flames with sadness, because though she could not feel the fire's warmth, the ever-changing beauty of the slowly burning timber was as mesmerizing as any coral reef she had ever swum through.

That wasn't the only reason she felt sad. All her life she had waited to meet someone who would make her feel the kind of fiery love and excitement that burned within young Lyssa. Now that she had found the one to whom she was willing to give her heart, he was using her to help expunge all decent feelings from the world. And she had no choice but to help him. She was bound by duty to her people—and bound by her feelings for the keeper.

"Phoebe Halliwell?" asked a low, throaty voice.

The double whirled and saw a good-looking young man wearing a brown shirt, cap, and shorts holding a package. "I have a package for Phoebe Halliwell. It's marked Urgent Delivery. Is that you? The woman who answered the door said—"

"Right, right, I'm Phoebe," said the nymph. "Do you need me to sign?"

The nymph had spent considerable time among humans, so she understood not only their language, but their ways. The spell cast by the keeper to give her the appearance of Phoebe Halliwell also gave her a spattering of the witch's memories and abilities—though none of her magic.

The deliveryman came forward and held out a clipboard with a pen. The fake Phoebe signed and waved as the young man took off. The nymph glanced at the winding steps and didn't see the Halliwells, so she decided to open the package to help pass the time.

It was from the mortal who had written the children's book about the lighthouse and all its legends—the same woman the keeper had warned away the night before. Panic filled the nymph as she tore the package open. Inside, she found a handful of papers, printouts from scans of century-old documents, and, on top, a note from the writer.

"I never thought any of it was real," the writer explained. "Who would? But you have to warn that poor, sweet couple. You have to make them see the danger they're in."

The nymph read on. She knew most of what the writer had to say already, but one passage made her raise her eyebrows.

"The pocket watch, Phoebe. If all the rumors and legends I've heard are true, then the pocket watch is the key!"

She read the letter all the way until the end, then reread the passage about the pocket watch.

"The pocket watch is the key," she whispered. She smiled. "No, not a key, really. An *anchor*."

The double heard the clatter of heels on the stairs. The witches would be here soon! She tossed the package in the fireplace and turned

her back to the sudden *whoosh* and roar as the flames consumed the papers.

"So what's up?" asked Paige as she strolled into view. "We got a call in the room that some guy was here to give you a special delivery or something. Insert joke here. . . ."

"It was nothing," the double replied.

Piper raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Sure didn't sound like nothing."

The double remembered the old lesson that all the best lies held a little bit of truth. "You remember the woman who wrote the book on the local legends? I think she's a little forgetful. She sent a signed copy of her book to my office—I got an e-mail about it—and she sent another copy here. I just got rid of the one I didn't need."

"That's too bad," Paige said, glancing at the package curling up in the flames. "Maybe someone would have wanted it at the local children's hospital or orphanage."

"Maybe," the double said as she returned to her assumed maid-of-honor duties. "Maybe . . ."

Piper had to hand it to Lyssa's wedding planners. They had outdone themselves. An elegant and towering ivory arch had been set up close to the lighthouse on the majestic cliff. The spot overlooked the breakers and the pounding waves of the ocean. Rows and rows of chairs, now filled with onlookers, had been set up with space for an aisle down the center. Near the head

of the ceremony, the minister stood, while James stole a glance at his ancient pocket watch, and his best man, Tom—a hottie if ever there was one—literally smacked James's wrist for the gesture and told his friend to put the watch away. Yup, Piper liked this guy already. The bridesmaids were on one side of the altar, the groomsmen, most of whom were relatives of Lyssa's whom Piper had never seen before, stretched out on the other.

On one side of the wedding party was a string quartet, while a wedding photographer waited in the back. Canopies formed by ten-foot-high potted plants enfolded each flank, and neatly shaded tables were lined with refreshments. Huge, bustling arrangements of flowers were everywhere in sight, including lovely violet bouquets for each of the bridesmaids. The reception would be held both in a large tent a few yards off from the main wedding party and in the first floor of the lighthouse, which had been tidied up and decorated for the occasion.

Phoebe stood near the head of the ceremony, chin raised high, yet acting a little fidgety.

Soon the music began to play, and everyone rose as the procession began. A little girl raced up the aisle flinging flowers so high, they landed in the hair of onlookers, followed by a boy, who Piper thought was the cutest little thing, bearing the ring on a satin pillow. Before

long, the bride appeared on the arm of her proud father—who was already choking back tears. Lyssa smiled at the sight and rested her head on her father's shoulder for a few steps as they walked.

It was picture-perfect. There wasn't a cloud in the rich blue sky.

Piper knew it was only a matter of time before it all went horribly wrong. She smiled as she was meant to smile when Lyssa took her place beneath the ornate arch with James. But inwardly, she felt her stomach muscles tighten the moment anyone went near one of the punch bowls or champagne bottles.

And, right on time, the moment the bride's hands gently laid themselves upon those of the groom, a low rumble of thunder rose up in the east. All heads turned to the sky, where a thin layer of deep gray clouds had suddenly appeared.

James laughed, and everyone else smiled, happy to follow his lead and put aside any worries that rain might ruin the ceremony.

The vows began. They were the simple, strong traditional lines of text with which everyone was familiar. Piper glanced around, still anxious that the happy day might still be spoiled by those nasty little nixies.

She noticed what was happening to the ice sculpture just in time. Beads of water were dripping down its side. The icily beautiful form of a female dancer—because dance had always been

Lyssa's passion—was melting and re-forming itself into something totally different.

"The nixies," Piper whispered to Paige, the sister closest to her. "They're back!"

"Great," Paige muttered. "Where?"

"The ice sculpture. Don't turn your head when you look at it," Piper commanded quietly.

"Got it. People will wonder what we're looking at and they'll look too."

"Exactamundo."

Out of the corner of their eyes, both sisters saw the ice sculpture suddenly re-form into a representation of a single huge, startling word:

HUSSY

Then it melted and re-formed again quickly, becoming an arrow pointing right at Phoebe!

"Check the crowd," Piper whispered urgently. "Anyone looking our way?"

"Nope," said Paige.

Piper's hands were crossed over one another at her side. She lifted her palms, aimed in the direction of the ice sculpture, which was melting again and transforming into a cache of ice daggers pointed right at Phoebe, and held her breath.

The ice sculpture exploded, causing gasps and a handful of startled cries to burst from those closest to the fine spray of water and ice that streaked out harmlessly from the table.

The minister faltered in his clear, smooth

delivery and everyone turned to the ruined ice sculpture as the caterers rushed over to see what had happened.

Piper smacked her forehead with her open palm. "Wow, the ice sculpture blew up. Isn't that funny? The same thing happened at my wedding! They must pack those things in weird chemicals or something. . . ."

The murmurs of alarm turned into low, curious laughs and the ceremony resumed.

"What *was* that?" Paige asked quietly. "I swear, it looked like the nixies were going to try to hurt someone this time!"

It sure did, thought Piper. And that someone is the maid of honor, not the bride or the groom. Why are the nixies so interested in Phoebe?

"So—is it working?" asked the true Phoebe Halliwell from her cavernous prison. "Are we sending a message to the wedding party?"

"I think so," said the leader of the courageous nixies. He could barely speak as he concentrated all of his power on a single spot in the mystical cage below him. During the night he had found the flaw in the keeper's barrier: The precise dimensions of the barrier had been rigidly defined to match up perfectly with the exact measurements of the walls, floor, and ceiling of their portion of the cavern. When Chet had kicked and pounded at the floor in frustration and despair, he'd created a small crack that

changed those dimensions—and weakened the hold of the keeper's spell.

"Those shoes," the nixie leader had said in the night, seconds after realizing Chet's breakthrough. "Phoebe, your high-heeled shoes, kick them over!"

Phoebe had been reluctant. "My Jimmy Choos? What do you have in mind?"

"Please!"

She shrugged off her shoes and kicked them to him, one at a time. The invisible barrier separating them was meant to keep the nixies in, but not to keep other things out. Using the stiletto heels, the nixies dug a deep enough hole in the floor of the cavern to unbalance the keeper's magic. But even though the nixie leader could shift his form like flowing water, he didn't dare try to fit through the opening he had made. The heat barrier, along with the other two deadly traps that comprised the cage, may have been weakened in this one place, but they were still potent enough to destroy any nixie that challenged them.

The nixies were far from defeated, though. They had many abilities. They could not only take on the exact forms of anything made of water, they could also *control* all types of water. True, they weren't powerful enough to stir up the ocean itself and send a tidal wave crashing upon the rocks or anything like that. But a fair amount of the mischief they had caused at the

dress shop and the bachelorette party had been achieved through their indirect influence of water. And now, through the small aperture they had made, they were directing their power to pull off similar tricks at the wedding, just over a greater distance.

"I said it before and I'll say it again," moaned the morose Chet, "this can't work, it isn't working, we're done for."

"Just keep focusing your power on the job at hand," admonished the nixies beside him.

While the nixie leader was busy keeping the hole below him from closing, his companions were working their own magic by exerting their influence over anything and everything made of water at the wedding.

"We'll probably boil someone's blood by mistake, you know," complained Chet. "Then how do we explain ourselves?"

This time, everyone just ignored the whining nixie.

Phoebe was concentrating just like the rest of them. Though she didn't share their powers, there was one thing she did have in common with them: The keeper had said he was using *all* of them to power his connection to the dark oogie guys under the sea. And that meant they were all, in some way, also connected to the keeper. Just as he could reach them, they in turn could trace a pathway all the way back to him. In a way Phoebe didn't entirely grasp, her

magical essence as a Charmed One was the key to making it all happen.

"A night school degree in Internet technologies really comes in handy," the nixie leader had said with a laugh. "Don't worry about the technical side of things, Phoebe. Just concentrate on how much you want to stop this guy and save your friend."

That's what she had been doing, and on some level she believed it was working, that she was making contact with her sisters and warning them about the pretender in their midst—and that snake the keeper up there on the altar! Now she felt a sensation, a sense of closeness with her sisters, that she usually only ever felt when they were casting a Power of Three spell.

A sound from the shore made Phoebe freeze.

"Roaring," Phoebe said anxiously. "I'm hearing roaring, bestial kinda roaring, from just outside the cave. It's getting louder and closer, and I gotta tell you guys, I know from experience that usually isn't a good thing!"

Shadows crowded in at the mouth of the cave, the weird, misshapen shadows of things that had been sent to keep the prisoners from escaping should their mystical bonds fail. Huge, crablike claws snapped like scissors while long, knifelike legs raked across the stones outside the cavern's mouth with a high, nerve-shattering scraping that made the hairs rise on the nape of Phoebe's long, lovely neck.

"See?" Chet cried. "See? What did I tell you! We're all doomed!"

"Not helping," Phoebe said as the shapes drew closer. She closed her eyes against them because she had no idea what else to do.

Forcing back her fear, Phoebe fought on to save her friend from the keeper.



Chapter 10

As the minister continued to speak and the loving couple gazed into each other's eyes, a battle was quietly being fought between the witches and the supernatural wedding crashers.

At the head of the ceremony, the minister asked, "Who gives this woman?"

Lyssa's father proudly approached. "That would be me!"

And everyone laughed, which was a very good thing, because it covered up the sound of wine bottles uncorking themselves on either side of the onlookers. The flying corks zigzagged and spiraled through the air to attack Phoebe like military smart weapons. Piper quickly froze them before they could reach their target and Paige orbed them away.

"Phoebe!" Piper whispered. "Are you aware of what's going on?"

"He's marrying someone else," Phoebe

intoned sadly, keeping her voice low enough that no one else would hear.

"We are under *attack*," Piper explained. "Actually, *you* are."

Phoebe began to turn at that one, and Piper nearly elbowed her to make the girl stand still and act like nothing was going on.

"Wow, Phoebe, they've really got it in for you today," Piper observed. "I guess all your spell did was tick 'em off even worse!"

Phoebe glubbed. Or gulped. But it *sounded* like a glub. She looked panicked. "How am I supposed to know why those little devils do the things they do? It's not like I subscribe to their newsletter or anything."

"They have a newsletter?" asked Paige, whispering with a raised eyebrow. "You mean like on the World Wide Watery Web?"

Piper snorted at that one.

"Uh—figure of speech," Phoebe quickly countered. "You know what I mean."

No, actually, we don't, Piper thought. Her sister wasn't acting at all like herself this morning. *The stress of being maid of honor must be getting to her.*

The minister cleared his throat and raised an eyebrow at the whispering sisters. The trio fell silent.

Piper remained on high alert as the minister continued the ceremony. She hoped the nixies would quit it and let poor Lyssa and James exchange their "I dos" in peace, but she had a

feeling the mischievous water spirits were only getting warmed up. Her hands twitched in readiness for a split-second freeze of the entire wedding party—and all the witnesses—in case the nixies decided to attack again.

But nothing happened.

"If any can show why this couple should not be lawfully wed," the minister said, "speak now or forever hold your peace."

Now that's a cue for trouble if ever there was one, thought Piper.

Again, the nixies failed to strike.

Okay, that's weird. Are they saving it all up for a big finish?

Piper watched as the happy couple exchanged rings and their vows. Lyssa was a stunning bride—and, like Phoebe, Piper wanted nothing but the best for the beautiful young woman.

The Light of the World sparkled on its chain, catching a final ray of sun before one of the gray clouds stole the light away.

The onlookers turned again toward the sky as a peel of thunder roared, this one closer than the last. A biting wind suddenly rose up and tugged and slapped at fluttering hems and the bride's veil.

The distraction was another lucky stroke—for the nixies. Piper caught their final attack a moment too late, her eyes widening as the punch bowl on the table closest to them shuddered—

and levitated three feet into the air. The pink punch swirled and churned like a savage tide as the bowl's wide spoon spun like a ship caught in a maelstrom.

"Oh, heck . . .," muttered Piper. Her hands shot up, and the glass punch bowl exploded, but the punch within it was already on its way. Phoebe cried out in horror as the pink punch pummeled her, splashing her face and soaking her dress. The women standing beside her jumped away, startled.

"Blilll-eahhh!" Phoebe cried, shaking and frantically scrubbing her arms and face with her flying fingers. The crowd gasped, and Lyssa drew back, some of the pink punch staining her dress too, but James's hand closed on her wrist and steadied her.

At the head of the ceremony, the minister stammered, "Um—um . . ."

"*Please* continue," James demanded. And because everyone was distracted by Phoebe's watery plight, no one saw the amber glow that suddenly rose in James's eyes—and a second, answering glow that blossomed in the minister's eyes an instant later.

Clearing his throat, the minister went on. "I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride!"

Cheers and applause broke out from the small crowd.

They kissed—and, suddenly, the blubbering

cries and watery screams of Phoebe Halliwell drowned out the applause of the well-wishers gathered for the wedding and arrested everyone's attention.

Except that the creature wearing the maid of honor's gown wasn't Phoebe Halliwell. Not unless it was an everyday thing for Phoebe's flesh to suddenly turn a weird shade of lime, or for her veins to become bright pink while her hair thickened and writhed like snakes, before vanishing altogether. "Phoebe's" nose withdrew to vertical slits, and her eyes and mouth transformed into large ovals while gills opened on her neck. And though the Charmed Ones *had* changed into all manners of things over the years—from comic book superheroines to Greek goddesses—this transformation was far from normal.

"It's not Phoebe," Paige said. "I thought something was fishy with her!"

Piper looked at her sister and frowned.

"Okay, bad pun," Paige admitted with a sheepish grin and a shrug. "I couldn't help it!"

The fake Phoebe backed away from the other members of the wedding party, her glistening scales radiating a dull pulsing emerald light.

"What is she?" cried a bridesmaid.

"It's the keeper's curse!" hollered one of the locals working the catering table.

Hoo-boy, thought Piper, we need a way of convincing these folks they're not looking at something magical, and we need it fast!

Piper planted her hands on her hips. "You know, Phoebe, green really isn't your color!"

"Yeah," added Paige, nodding toward the propped open door leading into the lighthouse as she advanced on the imposter. "Maybe we should take this in there and get this silly little prank of yours sorted out, whatcha say, sis?"

"Keeper, protect me!" the fish-woman wailed as she reached imploringly for James. "*Please!*"

A horrible echoing laughter burst from the head of the ceremony, and everyone looked as James draped his arm around the minister's shoulder. He threw his head back and laughed until his throat turned raw and a voice completely unlike his own left his lips.

"Protect *yourself*, underling." James thrust out his hand and a tumbling ball of flame appeared in his palm. "You nearly cost me everything—and I no longer have any need for your services!"

The sea nymph's eyes widened with terror at the keeper's betrayal. "The pocket watch!" she screamed to the Charmed Ones. "It's his anchor, he—"

"Enough!" James hurled the fireball and it struck the fish-woman full on. She threw her head back and screamed as the magical fires swept over her—and quickly reduced her to an ashen skeleton. Fistfuls of ash dropped to the floor as panic swept over the crowd.

"I . . . I don't understand," Lyssa cried. "What's happening?"

"Not James up there, huh?" asked Paige.

"No," Piper said as she surveyed the panicky crowd. "I'm starting to think that hasn't been James in a very long time."

"All that was yours is now mine, *wife*," James said brutally. He seized Lyssa's hand, his fingers closing over the necklace bearing the Light of the World. "Including this!"

Lyssa screamed as James brutally yanked the necklace with such force that it snapped apart. A nasty red welt appeared on one side of her throat where the chain had resisted the hardest. He held the sparkling diamond high and smiled, but the expression of joy somehow didn't reach his eyes; there was only cruelty in his face.

"The time for disguises is done," James roared as lightning crisscrossed the sky and peels of rolling thunder split the heavens. James's neatly tailored tuxedo changed shape, morphing instantly into a pea green jacket, jeans, and boots. A wool cap stitched itself across his head. "I am the keeper!"

"Aw, that's not what I wanted to hear," groused Piper. "Paige! Get the pocket watch!"

Paige held out her hand and yelled, "Pocket watch!" Her power flared—but the pocket watch didn't appear. "He must have it protected somehow!"

"So much for just hauling anchor," Piper said, referring to the sea nymph's final words. If they could get the watch away from James,

they might free him from the keeper's hold.

Tears streamed down Lyssa's face. "P-Piper? What's happening?"

"Turns out your guy here isn't who he said he is," Piper said sharply, closing on the keeper along with Paige.

Thunder exploded overhead.

"Like . . . Phoebe?" Lyssa asked softly.

"Not exactly, no," said Piper. "We don't really have time for explanations right now, hon. Just step away from—"

The keeper grabbed Lyssa's arm with his free hand and brutally yanked her to him. Pressing her body against his, he wrapped an arm around her neck from behind.

The Charmed Ones edged away. The keeper could easily snap Lyssa's neck if they tried to attack.

"James, no!" Lyssa shrieked. "You're hurting me!"

"Really?" he asked cruelly. "Good!"

"Let her go," Paige demanded. "Bad keeper! Bad, bad!"

He grinned and raised the Light of the World.

"Okay, it's a lot of bling-bling, but so what?" asked Piper. She was stalling him, trying to come up with a plan. All around them, Lyssa's family and the other attendees had been motionless with shock and fear, but now they were murmuring, crying, growling threats.

"Do you honestly mean to say that you do not

know the power of this stone?" asked the Keeper. "No, perhaps you do not. Let me show you!"

Raising the Light of the World, the keeper chanted an incantation:

*Let all who gaze upon this light
Know misery and anger
And fight, fight, fight!*

"Paige! Lyssa!" Piper hollered. "Eyes closed! Now!"

The three girls squeezed their eyes shut and caught only a glimpse of a brilliant golden flare as magical light shot forward from the Light of the World, blinding everyone who foolishly looked at the stone. The instant that light faded, people turned to whoever was beside them with misery and fury in their hearts.

"You know what I've always wanted you to know, but just didn't have the guts to tell you?" asked the tall, wiry young man standing beside the distinguished, gray-haired caterer.

"What's that?" asked the caterer.

"I hate your cooking," spat the assistant. "I've *always* hated it. You make fried chicken taste like it's been battered in nothing but grease. I could barely hold it down. You burn steaks, and you couldn't fix an omelet to save your life!"

"Really?" asked the caterer as he slipped a

long knife from the table. "I'm going to make an omelet out of you!"

Piper and Paige stared helplessly as everyone started turning on one another. The keeper had promised to plunge the world into a morass of absolute misery—and it looked like he was getting the ball rolling right here.

"You're a slob!" cried a toothpick-thin woman in her forties to the chunky guy next to her. "The biggest slob I've ever met in my life. All I ever do is pick up after you. I hate it. Come to think of it, I hate you!"

Her husband laughed bitterly. "Yeah, well, you know what? I hate you!"

The couple pushed and shoved—then clawed and grasped at one another with murderous glee.

Two women who had never laid eyes on each other before today bared their teeth as they began to fight. "You know what?" asked the first. "I don't know you. I don't know anything about you. But from the first moment I saw you, I realized I just couldn't stand you and I wouldn't be happy until I saw you torn limb-from-limb."

"Huh! That's funny . . .," said the second, grabbing her opponent's hair, "that's the same way I feel about you!"

Above all the cries of hatred and bitterness rose the taunting laughter of the miserable keeper.

Piper shook her head. She had no idea if the things coming out of these people's mouths had anything to do with reality or not. The powerful

magic racing through the crowd could easily trick someone into taking the slightest annoyance they may have felt only once and turning it into grounds for murder! Or it could convince someone that a harmless daydream or a flicker of idle fantasy was something that actually happened in reality.

"Leo! Leo, get your butt over here, and I mean right now!" Piper called.

But her summons went unanswered.

"Paige, I want you to orb out of here and get Leo!"

"I'm on it!" Paige nodded and summoned the sparkling cloud of light that would spirit her away.

The light faded quickly, but Paige remained. The orb didn't work!

"Paige . . .," Piper growled.

"I'm trying!" Paige yelled. "Something's blocking me."

Must be the same "something" that's keeping me from getting through to Leo, thought Piper. But if some kind of magical shield protected them, it was invisible to the naked eye.

Beside Piper, Paige was orbing potentially lethal objects out of the hands of the lunatic wedding guests. Piper knew that her sister was well aware that the Charmed Ones had a duty not to use their powers in front of nonmagical types whenever possible, but right now, all bets were off. These folks were already under

the influence of a dark and deadly magic.

"This is weird," Piper murmured.

"You're telling me!" Paige cried. "Wedding cake!" The cake appeared in her hands, and she quickly set it down. "Oh, I guess that really wouldn't have hurt anyone if it had connected, huh? I just hated seeing it get ruined." Paige licked her hands. "It really is delish!"

Piper froze a handful of warring wedding guests and blew up three metal folding chairs that were about to come down on heads. The wedding singer had his microphone cord wrapped around each of his palms and pulled tight like a garrote as he crept up behind his guitarist. "Paige!"

"I'm on it! Mike cord!" The cord appeared in Paige's hands and she tossed it on the growing pile of objects she had confiscated from the crazed guests.

Piper shook her head. "When I said this was weird, what I meant was, it's odd that the nixies helped us realize Phoebe wasn't really Phoebe."

"Yeah," added Paige. "You think maybe they knew James wasn't really James and *that's* why they were trying to bust up the wedding?"

Rain streaked down from the skies—and, suddenly, in the curtain of rain slapping down before Paige and Piper, the outline of their missing sister appeared.

"Guys, we could use a helping hand here," the watery vision of Phoebe called. "The nixies are

doing everything they can to shield you both from the keeper's bad mojo, but I don't know how long they can keep it up. Things are getting kinda dicey down here."

"The nixies?" asked Paige. "Then they really are—"

"Good guys, yep!" Phoebe said. "*Paige, I'm in that cave down the shore, a couple of feet down from where all the pelicans hang out! You'll see all the keeper's weird creepy pals coming in to get me, can't miss it. We'll try to help you orb this far, at least, but hurry!*"

Phoebe's image faded.

Paige was about to make an attempt at orb-ing when she spotted another wedding guest about to club the lady closest to her.

"Oh, no! One more—high-heel shoe!" The shoe appeared in Paige's hand and she dropped it on the pile. "These heels are killers, I'm tellin' you."

The sounds of even more arguing rose up around the sisters.

"You don't like dogs!" a woman screeched. "How can you say you love me and not even *like* dogs, huh? I'm going to make your life miserable for that!"

"I thought that's what you were already doing!" replied an angry male voice.

"See if you can reach Phoebe!" Piper said. "I'll do what I can here."

Paige steadied herself and again called on her power. This time, the sparkling light whirled around Paige—and when it faded, she was gone.



Chapter 11

Paige thought she would be ready for just about anything as she orbed into the shadow-laden cavern where Phoebe was being held prisoner.

She was wrong.

Monsters out of some grade-Z sci-fi flick from the 1950s were massing around Phoebe. They were part-crab, part-spider, and every one of them the size of a horse. Yet they weren't *attacking* Phoebe; not exactly, anyway. She was chained up, yanking at her bonds, gritting her teeth and squeezing her eyes shut as the creatures snapped their pincers near her face or stabbed at the wall at either side of her head or body.

Thwump-thwump-thwump-snapsnapsnap

Their display was hostile and unnerving, but not calculated to cause actual physical harm. Paige had to figure out why they weren't hurting the vulnerable witch—and what to do about them.

"Sheesh," said Paige. "All you-know-what's breaking loose at the wedding, and this is where I find you, just hanging around!"

Phoebe looked up to see her sister and smiled, relieved. "You know me . . . never the bridesmaid, always the chick chained up against a wall."

A few of the crab-critters turned to look at Paige—then turned back, ignoring her.

"Phoebe, they're trying to make you break your concentration!" guessed Paige. "Then you won't be able to help me orb us back to the wedding!"

"Doing a pretty good job of it too," muttered the bound witch.

"You could try getting us out of here," said a morose voice from the shadows. "Maybe we could help."

Paige whirled—and took in the sight of the imprisoned nixies. "Okay, what do I do?"

The nixie leader told her.

"Okay," Paige said, rolling up imaginary sleeves. "Chunk o' rock!"

A section of stone from within the nixies' prison weighing as much as a small boulder appeared in her hand and she dropped it and skipped back to keep it from falling on her toes.

"Stalactite!" she called. "Stalagmite!"

She tore away bits and pieces of the walls, ceiling, and floor of the cavern surrounding the imprisoned nixies, thus helping to change the

dimensions of their prison and disrupt the keeper's spell. All the while, Paige was aware that the crab-spiders were steadily losing interest in Phoebe—and edging closer to her.

"Uh, boy," Paige muttered, changing tactics and hurling chunks of rock at the rapidly advancing monsters. "Any ideas, here, Phoebe? I guess they didn't want to hurt you because the keeper's using your power for something, but that doesn't go for me!"

Behind her, Paige heard a sharp hiss. The nixie leader was changing shape, slipping down into the ever-widening gap beneath him. Flames shot up around his liquid-based form, and he wailed in agony as he pressed through. The other nixies threw themselves at the barrier before them, flames turning their arms and faces to steam—then a wall of cold rushed up, freezing their now twisted, misshapen bodies. Crackling rang out, and the icy forms of the nixies moved, pressing forward, only to be met with savage winds that attacked the fissures in their icy flesh and threatened to splinter them apart completely.

One of the crab-spiders was less than a foot away from Paige when she decided to go for broke. "Ceiling!" Paige screamed. Gathering her inner power, Paige put every last bit of mystical backbone she had into the command. The crab-spiders leaped on her, covering her like ants swarming over a leftover slice of pie

sitting outside on a summer's day—at exactly the moment huge chunks of stone appeared over the witch and fell with thunderous force.

"Paige!" screamed the stricken Phoebe, hauling at her shackles. Was her sister really buried under all that debris?

A tinkling of chimes sounded—and Paige orbbed in next to Phoebe.

"Whew!" cried Paige. "Timed that just right."

Paige had orbbed out from under the crab-spiders and the avalanche of stone at just the right instant. Phoebe and Paige gazed at the rubble where the clan of monsters had been trapped—and gasped as a few stones flipped over and nasty pincers and spider-legs clicked and scratched and *scraped* into view. The stones flew and the crab-spiders emerged. They were fewer now, but those that remained were no less deadly.

"What now?" asked Phoebe, her voice edged with tension.

"Don't look at me," answered Paige, her face hardening. "I got nothin'!"

"Allow me," said a gently flowing voice to one side of the witches.

Paige and Phoebe breathed a sigh of relief as the nixies strode into view—and attacked the crab-spiders. The monsters railed against the water beings, but the fight was over quickly. The nixies joined together, becoming a solid watery wave that beat and battered the monsters all the

way back to the lip of the cavern, then sent them scurrying across the sand before flinging them far into the ocean.

The trio of nixies who had done all the talking quickly returned, and their leader reached for Phoebe's shackles and closed his hands over them.

"Whoa—tickles!" hollered Phoebe. Something brittle cracked apart near her wrists—and she was free! The nixie had rusted the shackles into ruin with just a touch.

"I think we've got a wedding to crash," said the nixie leader.

Paige grinned and held out her hands. "Allow me!"

Phoebe took hold of Paige's shoulder as the nixies flowed over Paige like a kind and loving rain, electric and alive with promise.

Outside the lighthouse, the sky was darkening at midday as if an eclipse had been summoned. Piper was in hot pursuit of the keeper when she saw Paige, Phoebe, and the nixies arrive. The eldest Halliwell had no time to catch up with her sisters. She closed on the keeper as he hauled Lyssa into the lighthouse. Some of the wedding goers had already crowded inside the lighthouse, driven there by a magical compulsion delivered by the keeper and amplified by the hot little rock he had taken from Lyssa. The keeper meant to use them as hostages against

the interference of the Charmed Ones, Piper guessed.

Piper heard Phoebe, Paige, and the nixies race inside the lighthouse behind her. The keeper glowered at them from the stairs, sending shivers down Piper's back.

He nodded at Phoebe. "You've escaped. I prefer having things in their places," said the keeper, "but your presence here won't be a problem. My connection to the dwellers below is now strong enough with the aid of the Light of the World to continue without your borrowed power. I simply have to find a suitable way to show my thanks for all you've given me!"

"Yeah, promises, promises," Phoebe muttered sarcastically. "How about just handing over the rock?"

Good one, Piper thought.

Smiling, the keeper gestured again, raising the diamond high while keeping his grip on the weeping and terrified Lyssa. Emerald runes seared the air before him, carving out arcane and cryptic patterns an instant before another burst of blinding light filled the lower room of the lighthouse.

When the light cleared, the nixies were nowhere to be seen, but a pack of strange hounds had appeared before the keeper as he backed toward the spiral staircase. No, not hounds. They looked unfinished, their heads almost devoid of features, but their bodies were

heavily muscled, and they crouched low, like wolves about to spring at a victim.

Had the keeper transformed the nixies into these things? Piper didn't want to believe it but, one way or another, she would deal with the growling, angrily stalking beasts. They drew closer, half of them surrounding the Charmed Ones while the rest eyed the dazed wedding guests the keeper had driven into the light-house.

The keeper hauled Lyssa up the stairs toward the searchlight. "Come, my sweet. It's only fitting that you be on hand when I loose my final incantation—and see this world burn with misery for all it has done to me!"

Piper spun and aimed her hands at a section of the wall. The old stone wall exploded outward, leaving a jagged archway through which the wedding attendees could flee.

"Go on!" Piper cried to the wedding goers. "Vamoose!"

The people raced away, and from their dazed expressions, Piper had a sense that they were no longer under the spell of hatred and fury that had made them turn on one another before. It was possible that the Light of the World was so powerful that each time it was used, it erased all traces of the last spell it had been used to cast, thus recalling and using every available bit of magic in the general vicinity.

Paige orbbed the sisters out from the middle of the ring of critters, but could only get them so far as the base of the stairs. The keeper's weird magic blocked her again!

The Charmed Ones sailed up the stairs with Piper remaining a few steps behind her sisters. Claws bared, the faceless creatures scrambled up the stairs after them, the stench of the sea oozing from their predatory, unnatural forms.

"I've got this!" Piper cried, urging her sisters up the stairs ahead of her. She put out her hands, jerked them twice, and started as the closest of the creatures exploded in a green and brown seaweedlike pulp. "Yuck," Piper muttered. "*That* does it. I'm swearing off seafood for at least a week."

Two more creatures scrambled up, their feet slipping and sliding on the now wet and muck-encrusted stairs. *Aw, jeez, Piper thought, they're running right through what's left of their buddies that I just blew up!*

Climbing backward, Piper carefully mounted the stairs, leaning her shoulder against the wall for support. Her hands jerked and twitched, her power blowing creatures into paste, but still they came, and in greater numbers than before. And her heels were killing her!

"What's the deal with you guys?" Piper demanded. "And don't say you can't keep a good sea monster down either."

With their mouthless faces, the sea-hounds

weren't saying anything. They just pressed on against her with a relentless and frightening fury. Soon there were so many of them that they were scrambling up over one another's backs to reach her. Where were they all coming from?

She saw it then. The reason they just didn't go *poof* and vanish like good monsters when she blew 'em up good.

The icky remains of the creatures were twitching and shuddering, growing larger and heavier, snaking around and forming more of the monsters. For every two or three she destroyed, a half-dozen or more rose to take their places!

"Aw, crap," Piper spat. "Um, ladies? I might need a little help with this one!"

When her plea received no reply, Piper chanced a quick glance over her shoulder. Phoebe and Paige were nowhere to be found. Yeah, she had told them to go on ahead, but she'd thought they'd stay within hearing range and hold off on facing the keeper until she joined them. What if the Power of Three was needed? And what was she going to do with this flood of creatures?

In her moment of distraction, one of the monsters surged toward her, its webbed hand open and reaching for her.

"Yikes!" she cried, raising her hands and blowing him up just in time.

But there were so many more. . . .

"I've got one word for all of you squid-heads!" Piper hollered. "*Calamari!* Think about it!"

The sea creatures hesitated, but only for a heartbeat. Then they rushed her.

Phoebe and Paige circled the keeper and Lyssa in the high room housing the searchlight. The great light rose in the center of the room, and the keeper—in his stolen flesh—held the struggling bride by the throat. The keeper grinned like a madman, but his eyes were glazed and he was spellcasting, chanting words in an ancient language.

"Any ideas on how to stop him?" asked Phoebe.

Paige shook her head. "Not without risking Lyssa getting hurt." She thrust out her hand. "Pocket watch!"

The object did not appear in the witch's palm.

Meanwhile, the air around the keeper was charged with magical energy. Strange runes formed and faded in the air before him with jarring electrical crackles. The thunder outside shook the walls while a sudden streak of blinding light snaked down from the ceiling inside the room like the thrust of a jagged blade. Paige orbed herself and her sister out of the way as more jagged bursts of lightning appeared and struck at the sisters.

The witches reappeared in a haze of sparkling light once the bad weather cleared, and the

keeper was no longer smiling. A snarl of frustration creased his lips.

"Okay, I'm betting that even with the Light of the World, he can't just do that lightning thing whenever he wants," Phoebe ventured. "He probably has to build up to it."

Paige nodded. "Great. So what do we do in the meantime?"

A wind was rising within the glass-enclosed tower room where the light sat, its howls slicing through the room, making it hard for the sisters to hear each other.

"We've got to get the Light of the World away from him!" Phoebe hollered. She pursed her lips and blew at the tangled strands of her own hair that were getting blown in front of her face. "That or the pocket watch."

"Yeah?" said Paige, setting her hands on her hips. "You think?"

"Okay, okay, we need a plan," Phoebe said quickly. She crossed her bare arms over her chest and hugged herself against a nasty chill that rose from nowhere and settled in her veins. Her breath burst from her in icy clouds of vapor. "Oh, something tells me he's not going to give us time to come up with one. . . ."

Paige shivered—and started turning blue. Maybe the keeper could only do the heavy-duty magic like the lightning every now and then, but a casual curse of freezing cold appeared to be kids' stuff for him.

He laughed and nodded to confirm their suspicions. The keeper's magic was freezing the sisters from the inside out.

One moment, Piper had a faceful of ugly smelly sea creatures bent on ripping her to shreds with their gleaming talons; the next, she was staring at empty air. Her heart thundering, she saw the monsters being yanked back as if someone were vacuuming them away from downstairs. High, sparkling laughter echoed up from below.

It was the nixies!

Piper leaned back against the cold stone wall, catching her breath as the nixies flew into action. The tallest nixie thrust his arms out and they morphed into twin watery whirlpools as he raced up the stairs, the spiraling watery funnels that had been his arms striking the creatures low and flinging them high into the air. Then the whirlpools sent the monsters flipping back over the nixie's head, quickly clearing them from the steps and delivering them—whole and unexploded, so no more of the monsters would be created—to his pals below.

The other nixies worked fast. They shattered a window on a lower landing and drew in torrents of rain. Then, with their amazing powers, they created cages made of hardened water to trap all the creatures. Once the monsters were all neatly boxed up, the tall nixie spun and opened his

mouth wide, releasing a freezing cloud of frost that whipped down and stole over the cages, turning them into ice. The monsters battered at their cages, but could not free themselves.

Unfortunately, other even weirder threats were creeping in through the window that the nixies had shattered.

In crawled things with tentacles—lots and lots of tentacles, and others with gnashing maws lined with rows of sharp, pincerlike teeth, like predatory fish. Weird, wobbly eyes bobbed on stalks as critters with alligator heads and spider bodies sprang against the walls and ceiling.

"Don'tcha hate when that happens?" asked Piper.

"It's *typical*," said one of the smaller and plumper nixies in a depressed drawl. "Ever hear the expression 'from bad to worse'? Worse is where we always have to come in. . . ."

"Ignore him. Go to your sisters," commanded the tall nixie leader. "We swore long ago that we would protect the people of Serenity Cove from things like this. We'll hold the keeper's pet monsters off as long as we can."

"Okay . . ." Piper was about to race out of the room when another worry began to nag her. "Wait a minute! If you guys are here helping me, then who's making sure Lyssa's folks and the rest of the wedding party aren't being dragged off to meet the king of the sea or whatever outside?"

"Not to worry," said the nixie leader. "We can handle all of it!"

Piper nodded sharply, hoping they weren't just being optimistic.

Phoebe and Paige were so cold, they could barely move or even think straight. They clung to each other in a desperate effort to keep warm, but the freezing chill was nestled deep inside them, the keeper's magic seeping into their bones.

"O-o-orb in a-a-a heater!" Phoebe suggested. She forced her gaze toward the keeper, who was now casting his gaze admiringly over the searchlight. He still held Lyssa by the throat while clutching the Light of the World in his other hand.

"C-c-c-can't orb us out," Paige stammered. "M-m-magic's a-a-affecting my p-p-power."

Phoebe nodded. "Got any poh-poh—"

"Potions?" Paige cried. "In t-t-t-*this* dress?"

Phoebe nodded. The girl had a point.

The keeper rounded the light, dragging the frightened Lyssa with him, and stopped before the chilled Charmed Ones.

"Huh," murmured the keeper. "Now I don't know *why* I was worried about you witches. You're no threat at all."

"W-w-watch it, buster," Phoebe warned.

"Amusing, but no real threat."

Suddenly, Lyssa began squirming in his grip—and nearly broke free.

Phoebe's anger at the sight of her childhood friend being manhandled by this monster rose like a hot, frothing tide within her, warming her and helping her to fight off the freezing cold she felt inside. "Lyssa, try to get through to him! It's still J-J-James—"

"It's not!" Lyssa screamed. "It only *looks* like him. He's not in there at all—I can see that now. And the keeper—he won't listen. Not to you, not to anyone!"

The keeper glanced at the squirming, clawing Lyssa, whom he was still clutching by the throat and holding out from his body. "This is cumbersome." With a chortle, he tossed her away as if she were a useless ragdoll, and a sharp *crack* rang out as her head struck the wall, her unconscious form sagging limply to the floor. Phoebe tried to take a step in her friend's direction but couldn't move any farther. The steady rise and fall of Lyssa's chest told her what she needed to know.

"She's alive, she's b-b-breathing," Phoebe said in a relieved tone. She gestured angrily at the keeper. "No t-t-t-thanks to *you*!"

"Suffering is my business," the keeper said absently as he stared into the endless depths of the priceless jewel. "Don't expect me to apologize for being true to my nature. Ah, well. All will soon be in readiness."

A clattering of heels from the stairs made all their heads turn.

"Hmmm, the last sister is on her way," said the keeper gruffly. "If I allow her to join you, the Power of Three might be invoked. Somehow, I don't think I should allow that."

"P-P-Piper!" Paige called out in a low, hoarse warning.

Phoebe clutched at her neck as the cold made her throat suddenly dry out and close. She couldn't say a word—couldn't even breathe.

"The sister who makes things explode is coming," the keeper mused. "I think I can come up with a fitting fate for her. . . ."

A sizzling fireball appeared in the keeper's hand as the echoing of heels grew louder and a shape darted into view in the door. The keeper hurled the fireball, and a powerful explosion rocked the room.

"Piper!" Paige cried.

The keeper laughed, then abruptly stopped laughing as he took in the mess strewn about the doorway. "What is that? It looks like—seaweed!"

"Got it in one, hotshot!" someone called from a few steps down. Suddenly, Piper popped into the doorway, her hands raised and ready for action.

The keeper hauled his open hand back, a second fireball appearing in it, but he was too late. Piper charged in, loosing one round of explosive magic at him after another. The bursts struck the keeper full-on, crimson amber depth charges exploding against his chest. He stumbled back,

the fireball falling from his flailing fingers. As the keeper's muscular form struck the light and fell to the floor, stunned, the fireball rolled toward Phoebe and Paige. As it dissipated, a flare of supernatural energy reached up and bathed the witches with its glow.

"Woo-hoo!" Paige cried, rubbing life back into her arms. The keeper's curse of coldness had been undone by the fireball's heat. "So much for that cold snap!"

Phoebe swallowed and took several long, healthy breaths of air before even trying to speak. Finally, she said, "I'll second the woo-hoo!"

Piper looked over at her sisters. "You guys okay?"

"We are now," Phoebe told her. "What did you do?"

"Your pals the nixies helped me out. They gave me one of those ugly critters from downstairs gift-wrapped—magically speaking, that is. I tossed it at the door instead of me, that seaweed-looking gunky mess is what's left of it . . . for now. Speaking of which"—Piper turned and froze the yucky mess left behind—"that should keep it from getting up again and multiplying."

"Pardon?" Paige asked.

"Never mind, long story."

The keeper moaned and started to stir. Piper strode over to him.

"Think you can get away with ruining our

friend's wedding?" Piper hissed. "Well, think again!" She flamed him with more explosive bursts until he settled down again.

Phoebe went to her friend, who was still unconscious. "Lyssa . . .," she whispered. "We have to get her to a hospital. She might have a concussion, or worse."

Paige nodded. "If you guys are sure you can hold down the fort without me."

"Go for it," Phoebe urged.

Touching the unconscious bride's arm, Paige began to orb. The swirl of magical energy engulfed her—and faded. She wasn't going anywhere.

"I don't get it," Paige murmured. "He's down for the count, but I still can't orb out of here."

A sudden and shocking roar exploded from outside. The witches spun around to see great luminous shapes rise from the starless abyss that had erupted outside the lighthouse. Some of the living shapes outside might have been starfish the size of small buildings, while others looked like prehistoric flyers with wings as wide across as those of a small jet. Giant, grasping tentacles whipped forward, slapping against the glass enclosure separating them from the sisters.

"Hoo-boy," Phoebe said. "When this keeper guy summons thingees to help him plunge the world into darkness and misery, he doesn't mess around, does he?"

"Nope," Piper said. "And neither do we."

Piper saw the keeper's pocket watch peeking out from his jacket. She snatched it up and smashed it underfoot.

"James!" Piper called. "You can come out now."

The keeper stirred again. "Fool . . . I'm too powerful now. That might have worked before I had the Light of the World."

"Thanks for reminding me." The oldest sister pummeled the keeper a few more times, then reached down to snatch the Light of the World from the fallen keeper's hand—and yelped as a crackling burst of lightning slapped her back several feet to smash against the searchlight.

"Piper!" cried Phoebe.

The lightning whipped around the searchlight, and as Paige and Phoebe helped Piper from the light's cold glass, the searchlight roared to life, its blinding rays streaking out into the darkness. The creatures outside shrieked in surprise and rage, shrinking away from the piercing beam as it scraped and scoured the sky.

Phoebe turned—and saw the keeper on his feet again. The back of his hand smacked against her jaw and she spun around, reeling, as the keeper struck out with twin bursts of lightning at her sisters. Piper and Paige crumpled to the floor.

Phoebe knew it was all up to her now. Rallying her strength, she screamed as she ran at the startled keeper, her cries as loud and piercing and ridiculous as she could make them. The

tactic was one Cole had taught her long ago: *Make them think you're even crazier than they are and you just might stand a chance.*

The keeper's eyes widened, and Phoebe threw her best right hook at him. The blow connected solidly, and she saw stars before her eyes as pain shot up from her bare knuckles. Jumping back to achieve some distance, she whirled and connected again with a spinning high kick to the keeper's head that shattered the heel of her shoe, followed by an open-palm blow to the bridge of her opponent's nose and a half-dozen high kicks.

Panting, rocking on her single unbroken heel, Phoebe tried to get her breath as she finally got a good look at how badly the keeper had been mussed up by her attack.

He was smirking. It was that "oh, are we done playing now, little girl?" smirk that Cole used to produce at the most infuriating times. There wasn't a bruise on him.

"Be a good little girl and lie down with your sisters," the keeper advised.

Her lip curling in distaste and fury, Phoebe brought her fist back for one final blow—and was met with a burst of lightning that flung her across the room with the others.

When her vision cleared and her ears stopped ringing, Phoebe realized she was lying on her side on the cold stone floor next to Paige and

Piper—and that *their* eyes were open too. Piper placed a single finger to her lips. *Shhhhhh . . .*

"Whisper," mouthed Paige.

"What happened?" Phoebe asked softly.

"Best I can figure?" replied Piper. "All those hits I dished out weakened him a little, otherwise, all three of us would be out for the count."

"You mean he thinks we're unconscious?" asked Phoebe. "Or . . . y'know, pushing up daisies?"

Her sisters nodded. They had to be very still and very quiet to make sure their enemy didn't notice that he had made a mistake and come back to finish them.

"So what do we do?" whispered Phoebe. She kept an eye on the keeper, who was carefully checking the searchlight's mechanisms and making adjustments to its height.

"We've come up with a vanquish that ought to work," Piper stated flatly. "A Power of Three spell."

"A vanquish?" Phoebe said worriedly. "Listen, I don't have any intention of letting this guy turn the world into—well—whatever it is he's planning to turn it into. . . ."

"Lonely, miserable, and fuel for those things, I'd wager," Paige ventured, nodding toward the monstrous, gigantic shapes railing outside the windows.

"Right, um . . . but that's still James over there. His body. What happens to him if we—"

Piper fixed her with a piercing glare. "What happens to the world if we don't? A world, I might add, where my husband and baby boy are waiting for us?"

"Okay," Phoebe said, unable to argue with her on that score. "But what if there was a way to get the Light of the World away from the keeper, drive him out of James's body, and put James back where he belongs?"

"What do you think we've been trying to *do*?" Piper snarled.

"Phoebe, look around you!" cried Paige. "Those are prehistoric nethergods or things ripped out of another time-space continuum or whatever it is they call it. Not the kind of thing you run into shopping for new shoes, 'kay?"

"Duh," Phoebe retorted.

Paige took her hand. "I'm just saying, we're looking at the fate of the world here, honey. I'm all for true love winning out in the end, but . . ."

"True love," Phoebe said softly. "Yeah, I guess it is a soft spot for me. I guess a vanquish is the only way. . . ."

"If we can," Piper said, her eyes smoldering with determination. "We won't really know if it'll work until we try."

"The keeper thinks we're still out cold," Paige said. "We should wait until he's really into his spellcasting and not paying any attention over here—then zap him!"

Phoebe forced a faint flicker of a grin, then looked away from her sisters.

True love . . .

And near the window, the keeper paused and whispered, "Trudy, my fair one, why have you not come to me in our hour of triumph? We have vengeance at last for all they've done to us. A hundred years I've been waiting to hear your voice again. . . . Why won't you come? What I've done here is pure and true. Why won't you come to me?"

Phoebe heard the keeper's words and wondered—was the keeper *really* interested in the truth? He blamed everyone in the world for his miseries, particularly for losing the love of his life. He seemed fated to spend an eternity separated from his precious Trudy. But, why? What strange force was preventing the keeper's tortured spirit from making contact with his beloved's spirit?

There was only one person Phoebe could think of who might be able to answer that question.

"Um, change of plans," Phoebe whispered. "Another option, anyway."

"We're listening," Piper said.

Phoebe spelled it out for them. They would need *two* Power of Three spells ready. But with any luck, only *one* of them would have to be used.

As the keeper chanted with his back turned to

the sisters, the Charmed Ones rose up and cast their spell:

*Powers that be
We sisters three
Call on thee
Light the way
For one lost that day
Bring her here and now—with truth to say!*

A figure appeared: the spirit of the keeper's lost love.

The woman called Trudy looked more like an angel than a ghost. Her form was golden and gossamer, her hair flowing in a gentle unseen breeze.

And she *was* beautiful.

The keeper faltered in his spellcasting as he sensed her presence. Turning, he stared at his lost love and sank to his knees, ignoring the sight of the recovered witches.

"D-darling?" he asked. "Trudy, my angel—is it really you?"

She nodded.

"But . . ." He groped for words. "I've spent so long looking for you. Why didn't you come to me when I called you?"

Her gaze was filled with sadness. "I could not. Love was the force that bound us when we both lived, but it wasn't love that guided your summons."

He shuddered and clutched the enchanted jewel. "No. I won't believe it! This is a trick of some kind. An illusion! My Trudy would share my desire for vengeance. She would feel as cheated as I feel!"

Phoebe cleared her throat and waved at the newly arrived spirit. "Um—Trudy, right?"

The shining woman smiled at the young beautiful witch.

"Trudy, listen, we may not have a lot of time here," Phoebe explained. "If there's any way you can make a believer out of this guy, now's the time. Otherwise . . ."

Trudy gazed to the window where the storm raged. The creatures outside that had been summoned to help usher in a new Dark Age of terror roared and writhed in anticipation. Trudy slowly lowered her head in understanding and turned her attention fully to the keeper.

"She walks in beauty, like the night," quoted the lithesome spirit.

The keeper had raised his hands and was about to continue his dark magic—but he hesitated, his gaze suddenly riveted upon his lost love. "*Trudy?*"

She nodded. "You remember those words. A line of poetry from Byron, the first thing you ever said to me. Remember? Our gazes met across the room at the final party my dearest aunt, who raised me, would ever throw. She passed over that very night, and you were there

to comfort me, to help me see beyond my pain and loss. . . ."

"Trudy!" he cried, his voice echoing with pain and sorrow.

"You promised the young man whose body you stole the absolute truth," Trudy observed. "But how could you possibly deliver on that promise when you have run from the truth for the span of several lifetimes?"

The keeper stood to face her. "I—I don't know what you're talking about."

All around the sisters, the lighthouse walls shook as the things from the sea impatiently struck at the tower.

"Phoebe," Piper urged. "I don't know how much longer we've got. This place could come down around our ears if those guys keep it up! If we're gonna whammy this guy, it'll have to be soon!"

Paige nodded swiftly. "Yah know, I think you oughta listen to her!"

"Just a little longer," Phoebe said, keeping her fingers crossed that her plan would work. Otherwise, poor James would be banished from existence *along* with the evil keeper.

"All right," the keeper said sternly. "I believe it is you, my darling. But what's done is done, and there must be vengeance for what happened!"

"Has all the death and misery you've caused over the last century in my name not been enough for you?" Trudy asked sadly.

"No! Not nearly enough," he said, moving to the blindingly bright searchlight. "A world that would allow such a terrible thing to happen, that would tear us apart from each other at the height of our love and happiness, deserves every horror I can rain down upon it."

Phoebe gasped as the keeper thrust the Light of the World into the searing beam of pure white light soaring from the searchlight.

"The power of this lamp, which I tended in life, will help me scour the world with a light that will sear love and happiness from all!" the keeper promised.

"Phoebe," Paige urged as she crowded beside Piper and took the eldest Halliwell's hand. "It's time."

"Just a little longer . . . ," pleaded Phoebe. "She can reach him—I know she can."

Trudy stared at her lost love and shook her head. "I spoke of truth. You speak only of vengeance—vengeance in the name of lies!"

The keeper hesitated, his hand holding the stone mere inches from the glass of the searchlight. "You . . . didn't love me?"

"Of course I did," said the woman's spirit. "I still do. Love like ours is eternal. But only *truth* can light the way back to reclaiming what we shared."

"What . . . *truth*?" He spat that final word with contempt.

"The crashing of my boat was not a result of

sabotage. Nor was it the act of a cruel universe that was blind to love. You were the one who made the mistake resulting in the light failing at the crucial moment. You were so excited about my return that you allowed a fatal flaw when you checked the machinery."

Phoebe nodded as she put it all together. "Just like the prison where he kept us. It had a flaw too!"

The keeper trembled. "Impossible!"

Trudy silently swept toward him and laid her hand on his arm. He shuddered at her touch. "You were human, my love," Trudy reminded him. "You made a mistake. But don't you see? It doesn't matter now. I forgive you—and eternity waits for us."

Piper shook her head. "He ain't buying it. Paige?"

"No, wait!" Phoebe urged.

"Sorry, sis," Paige said firmly as she turned to Piper. "I'll snatch the rock with a quick orb while he's distracted, and you blow up the light."

"Got it," agreed Piper.

Phoebe watched helplessly as her sisters unclasped their hands and raised them to use their powers. Then, in a fit of desperation, she leaped high, her power levitating her a half dozen feet into the air, and shot forward at the keeper, delivering a series of powerful kicks at the possessed man that sent him reeling back from the glaring light. He stumbled, and the

Light of the World flew from his hand.

Piper snatched it up and took Paige's hand. "The vanquish, Phoebe. Now!"

"James!" Phoebe cried, ignoring her sister's demand and casting her gaze wildly about the room. "I'm betting you're still here, somewhere. If you ever want to get back to your sweetie—and I think you do—fight this guy! Make him see the truth!"

The keeper scrambled at the witch holding the powerful jewel and gasped, freezing in his steps as an echoing voice burst from all around him.

"What she's saying *is* true," James cried from the stones of the lighthouse, in which he'd been imprisoned. "Keeper, think back, blast it. You have to remember the night before the shipwreck. Catalog your chores, your duties, and your actions that night. Think about what you did and *didn't* do!"

An image formed in the glowing light of the blazing searchlight: an image from the past. The keeper, alive and in his true body, stared at the beautiful wedding ring he had purchased for his beloved with all of his savings. He liked the way it sparkled in the searchlight's beam. Then, a peel of thunder distracted him. He set the ring down and did not hear, did not *see*, as it slid from the light into the very gears that controlled the searchlight's housing apparatus, slipping between them and being ground into a

shapeless mass that caused the machinery to stop dead and the light to fail!

The vision faded, and the keeper shook like a terrified animal. When he raised his face to the ghost of his lost love, tears were streaming down his borrowed face. "Yes," he said at last. "Yes, I see it all now. It was my fault. Yes!"

"Then make up for it now," Trudy begged him. "Now—before it is too late."

With that, the keeper raised his hand and drew an arcane symbol in the air. A fiery green rune burst before him, amber flecking its edges. When it vanished, the storm, and the creatures that had come with it, disappeared as well. The keeper's spirit, a hazy, luminous, gossamer form, drifted up from the prone body it had inhabited these past few days, and opened its arms to Trudy.

Lyssa stirred just in time to see the tortured spirit leave James. She ran to her fallen sweetheart and cradled his head in her lap as his eyes blinked open and he slowly came around. He whispered her name, and she laughed with relief—silencing his next question with a bold and powerful kiss.

The keeper and his love merged together, becoming a single, shining form that suddenly shot toward the Light of the World—and disappeared within its clear, labyrinthine chambers.

"My love, I know what you've told me is true," the keeper said, his echoing voice no

longer filled with hate as it rang out for the final time within the lighthouse. "I have spent a lifetime—and beyond—denying that truth. Will you be mine once more?"

"Nothing would make me happier," came Trudy's ghostlike, trembling reply. Their voices faded, and soon, the only sounds that could be heard were the laughter of the young lovers about to be wed and the gentle lapping of the waves outside.

"Well, I have an idea," Phoebe said brightly. "We might have to go over to the mansion to do it, but how about we give that old wedding thing another try?"

"So what does everyone *think* happened?" Leo asked as he gently cradled Wyatt.

"You know," Piper said between mouthfuls of wedding cake. It was a bright sunny day once more, and the wedding had been a smashing success after all. "A freak storm, some weird electrical-wiring issues, a couple of the local teenage troublemakers slipping something in the punch—all of the above."

"Got it. I just wish I'd heard your summons and been able to come and help." He held up the Light of the World. "But I'll make sure this finds a new guardian. Least I can do."

The moment the sisters had gotten free of the lighthouse, Piper had begun calling to Leo. He'd come right away and immediately had set to

work healing the cuts and scrapes sustained by those attending the wedding, making sure Lyssa's injuries weren't more serious than they had appeared, and basically working all the one-man miracles for which Piper had come to depend on him.

"The fact that you couldn't hear me wasn't your fault," Piper assured her husband. "That was the keeper's doing. Besides, you were at home keeping Wyatt safe. No matter what could have happened up there in the lighthouse, there's nowhere more important you could have been. At least for this overprotective and very proud mama."

"So," Leo said awkwardly. "Have you decided whether to buy the minivan?"

"Why?" asked Piper, scrutinizing her husband's handsome face for clues to his sudden interest.

"No reason, it's just . . ." He shrugged. "Me and the Internet—that whole thing's turned out to be kind of a bust. Things you find there look so good at first, but then there's all this fine print you find out about later when you're dealing with the real thing, and . . . our insurance would skyrocket if we got that car."

"No problem," Piper said. "It's not like I fell in love with it, or anything. I save that up for you!"

He kissed her, and together they took in the fun, mad chaos that was the reception, which

was now being held in the sprawling mansion. Lyssa ran over to them.

"Hey, you two!" Lyssa said, her smile beaming. "The photographer's going to be ready for you in just a couple of minutes."

"Excellent," Leo told her.

Lyssa winked at Piper. "Your baby is the most beautiful thing in the world. You know this, right?"

"I do!"

"Funny," said Lyssa, "I was just saying that. . . ."

Across the room, Phoebe and Paige were dancing, though their moves could do nothing to take the spotlight off Lyssa's parents, who danced and sang and had the time of their lives.

The trio of surfers the girls had seen on their first day here approached.

"Whoa!" cried the tallest. "Did you see all those lights in the sky? Totally misterioso, yo! Totally!"

Phoebe squinted. The guy in the middle was taller than the other two. And the chubby one in the back had a face that was set in a perpetual scowl.

"Weddings," the chubby guy muttered. "Who needs 'em?"

"Except for the cake," the other one commented.

"Hold on!" Phoebe said with a startled gasp. "It's you guys! The nixies!"

The tallest one laughed. "Right on. Hey, we like to mingle and we need a way to keep an eye

on what's happening here in the village. What can I say?"

"Awesome," Phoebe said, giving the trio a firm thumbs-up for all their help.

The music stopped, and the nixies wandered off toward a trio of Lyssa's pretty young cousins, who rewarded them with welcoming smiles.

Paige saw something in Phoebe's eyes that she hadn't seen since they'd come here: hope that true love not only existed, but was for everyone.

"I can picture it," Phoebe said with a contented sigh as she regarded Lyssa and James, the happy couple. "Me up there one day, getting married. You, too. And all of us living happily ever after!"

"Hold on, sister. You having another vision?" asked Paige. "Or is that just wishful thinking?"

Phoebe's smile was brighter than even the Light of the World. "You know what they say . . . anything's possible!"



About the Author

Scott Ciencin is a *New York Times* bestselling author of more than seventy books from Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, Scholastic, and many more. He has written *Charmed: Luck Be a Lady* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Sweet Sixteen*, and cowritten *Angel: Nemesis* and the *Angel* short story "It Could Happen to You" with his wife, Denise. He has worked on the *Jurassic Park*, *Star Wars*, *Transformers*, and *Dinotopia* franchises, written for Marvel and DC Comics, and is the author of the popular *Vampire Odyssey* and *Dinoverse* (which has recently been optioned as a feature film) series. He is also the writer of *Everquest: The Rogue's Hour* for CDS and Sony, and the prestige *Silent Hill* comics from IDW Publishing, based on the international best-selling horror video game and motion picture. He lives in Sarasota, Florida with his beloved wife Denise.

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LIGHT OF THE WORLD

*From sea to sea to shining sea,
I bade that she come back to me—
Without her look, without her face,
I bade I too would leave this place.*

The Charmed Ones couldn't be happier—Phoebe and Piper's childhood friend Lyssa is getting married and has asked them to be bridesmaids! They're thrilled to support her at her wedding, and jump at the chance to get away to the seaside for a little while.

The ceremony will take place in Serenity Cove's beautiful old lighthouse, which is rumored to be haunted by the vengeful spirit of the lighthouse keeper who lost his true love at sea—one hundred years ago, on the date of Lyssa's wedding. The Halliwell sisters ignore the rumors . . . until, that is, they notice the strange behavior of Lyssa's fiancé. He seems to have become obsessed with Lyssa's family heirloom, a strange and beautiful diamond called the Light of the World. Can the Charmed Ones disclose his true identity and intentions before their friend says "I do" to Mr. Wrong?

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